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Book the First.

FATAL FRIENDSHIP.

CHAPTER I.

THE HOUSE IN BLOOMSBURY.

THERE are some houses whereof the outward aspect is sealed with the seal of respectability—houses which inspire confidence in the minds of the most sceptical of butchers and bakers—houses at whose area-gates the tradesman delivers his goods undoubtingly, and from whose spotless door-steps the vagabond children of the neighbourhood recoil as from a shrine too sacred for their gambols.

Such a house made its presence obvious, some years ago, in one of the smaller streets of that west-central region which lies between Holborn and St. Pancras Church. It is perhaps the nature of ultra-respectability to be disagreeably

conspicuous. The unsullied brightness of No. 14 Fitzgeorge-street was a standing reproach to every other house in the dingy thoroughfare. That one spot of cleanliness made the surrounding dirt cruelly palpable. The muslin curtains in the parlour windows of No. 15 would not have appeared of such a smoky yellow if the curtains of No. 14 had not been of such a pharisaical whiteness. Mrs. Magson, at No. 13, was a humble letter of lodgings, always more or less in arrear with the demands of quarter-day; and it seemed a hard thing that her door-steps, whereon were expended much labour and hearthstone—not to mention house-flannel, which was in itself no unimportant item in the annual expenses—should be always thrown in the shade by the surpassing purity of the steps before No. 14.

Not satisfied with being the very pink and pattern of respectability, the objectionable house even aspired to a kind of prettiness. It was as bright, and pleasant, and rural of aspect as any house within earshot of the roar and rattle of Holborn can be. There were flowers in the

windows ; gaudy scarlet geraniums, which seemed to enjoy an immunity from all the ills to which geraniums are subject, so impossible was it to discover a faded leaf amongst their greenness, or the presence of blight amidst their wealth of blossom. There were birdcages within the shadow of the muslin curtains, and the colouring of the newly-pointed brickwork was agreeably relieved by the vivid green of Venetian blinds. The freshly-varnished street-door bore a brass-plate, on which to look was to be dazzled ; and the effect produced by this combination of white door-step, scarlet geranium, green blind, and brass-plate was obtrusively brilliant.

Those who had been so privileged as to behold the interior of the house in Fitzgeorge-street brought away with them a sense of admiration that was the next thing to envy. The pink and pattern of propriety within, as it was the pink and pattern of propriety without, it excited in every breast alike a wondering awe, as of a habitation tenanted by some mysterious being, infinitely superior to the common order of householders.

The inscription on the brass-plate informed the neighbourhood that No. 14 was occupied by Mr. Sheldon, surgeon-dentist; and the dwellers in Fitzgeorge-street amused themselves in their leisure hours by speculative discussions upon the character and pursuits, belongings and surroundings of this gentleman.

Of course he was eminently respectable. On that question no Fitzgeorgian had ever hazarded a doubt. A householder with such a door-step and such muslin curtains could not be other than the most correct of mankind; for, if there is any external evidence by which a dissolute life or an ill-regulated mind will infallibly betray itself, that evidence is to be found in the yellowness and limpness of muslin window-curtains. The eyes are the windows of the soul, says the poet; but if a man's eyes are not open to your inspection, the windows of his house will help you to discover his character as an individual, and his solidity as a citizen. At least such was the opinion cherished in Fitzgeorge-street, Russell-square.

The person and habits of Mr. Sheldon were in

perfect harmony with the aspect of the house. The unsullied snow of the door-step reproduced itself in the unsullied snow of his shirt-front; the brilliancy of the brass-plate was reflected in the glittering brightness of his gold-studs; the varnish on the door was equalled by the lustrous surface of his black-satin waistcoat; the careful pointing of the brickwork was in a manner imitated by the perfect order of his polished finger-nails and the irreproachable neatness of his hair and whiskers.

No dentist or medical practitioner of any denomination had inhabited the house in Fitzgeorge-street before the coming of Philip Sheldon. The house had been unoccupied for upwards of a year, and was in the last stage of shabbiness and decay, when the bills disappeared all at once from the windows, and busy painters and bricklayers set their ladders against the dingy brickwork. Mr. Sheldon took the house on a long lease, and spent two or three hundred pounds in the embellishment of it. Upon the completion of all repairs and decorations, two great wagon-loads of furniture, dis-

tinguished by that old-fashioned clumsiness which is eminently suggestive of respectability, arrived from the Euston-square Terminus, while a young man of meditative aspect might have been seen on his knees, now in one empty chamber, anon in another, performing some species of indoor surveying, with a three-foot rule, a loose little oblong memorandum-book, and the merest stump of a square lead-pencil. This was an emissary from the carpet warehouse; and before nightfall it was known to more than one inhabitant of Fitzgeorge-street that the stranger was going to lay down new carpets. The new-comer was evidently of an active and energetic temperament, for within three days of his arrival the brass-plate on his street-door announced his profession, while a neat little glass-case, on a level with the eye of the passing pedestrian, exhibited specimens of his skill in mechanical dentistry, and afforded instruction and amusement to the boys of the neighbourhood, who criticised the glistening white teeth and impossibly red gums, displayed behind the plate-glass, with a like vigour and freedom of

language. Nor did Mr. Sheldon's announcement of his profession confine itself to the brass-plate and the glass-case. A shabby-genteel young man pervaded the neighbourhood for some days after the surgeon-dentist's advent, knocking a post-man's knock, which only lacked the galvanic sharpness of the professional touch, and delivering neatly-printed circulars to the effect that Mr. Sheldon, surgeon-dentist, of 14 Fitzgeorge-street, had invented some novel method of adjusting false teeth, incomparably superior to any existing method, and that he had, further, patented an improvement on nature in the way of coral gums, the name whereof was an unpronounceable compound of Greek and Latin, calculated to awaken an awful reverence in the unprofessional and unclassical mind.

The Fitzgeorgians shook their heads with prophetic solemnity as they read these circulars. Struggling householders, who find it a hard task to keep the two ends which never have met and never will meet from growing further and farther asunder every year, are apt to derive a dreary

kind of satisfaction from the contemplation of another man's impending ruin. Fitzgeorge-street and its neighbourhood had existed without the services of a dentist, but it was very doubtful that a dentist would be able to exist on the custom to be obtained in Fitzgeorge-street. Mr. Sheldon may, perhaps, have pitched his tent under the impression that wherever there was mankind, there was likely to be toothache, and that the healer of an ill so common to frail humanity could scarcely fail to earn his bread, let him establish his abode of horror where he might. For some time after his arrival people watched him and wondered about him, and regarded him a little suspiciously, in spite of the substantial clumsiness of his furniture and the unwinking brightness of his windows. His neighbours asked one another how long all that outward semblance of prosperity would last; and there was sinister meaning in the question.

The Fitzgeorgians were not a little surprised, and were perhaps just a little disappointed, on finding that the newly-established dentist did manage to hold his ground somehow or other,

and that the muslin curtains were renewed again and again in all their spotless purity ; that the supplies of rotten-stone and oil, hearthstone and house-flannel were unfailing as a perennial spring ; and that the unsullied snow of Mr. Sheldon's shirt-fronts retained its primeval whiteness. Wonder and suspicion gave place to a half-envious respect. Whether much custom came to the dentist no one could decide. There is no trade or profession in which the struggling man will not receive some faint show of encouragement. Pedestrians of agonised aspect, with handkerchiefs held convulsively before their mouths, were seen to rush wildly towards the dentist's door, then pause for a moment, stricken by a sudden terror, and anon feebly pull the handle of an inflexible bell. Cabs had been heard to approach that fatal door—generally on wet days ; for there seems to be a kind of fitness in the choice of damp and dismal weather for the extraction of teeth. Elderly ladies and gentlemen had been known to come many times to the Fitzgeorgian mansion. There was a legend of an old lady who had been seen to arrive in a

brougham, especially weird and nutcrackery of aspect, and to depart half-an-hour afterwards a beautified and renovated creature. One half of the Fitzgeorgians declared that Mr. Sheldon had established a very nice little practice, and was saving money ; while the other half were still despondent, and opined that the dentist had private property, and was eating up his little capital. It transpired in course of time that Mr. Sheldon had left his native town of Little Barlingford, in Yorkshire, where his father and grandfather had been surgeon-dentists before him, to establish himself in London. He had disposed advantageously of an excellent practice, and had transferred his household goods—the ponderous chairs and tables, the wood whereof had deepened and mellowed in tint under the indefatigable hand of his grandmother—to the metropolis, speculating on the chance that his talents and appearance, address and industry, could scarcely fail to achieve a position. It was further known that he had a brother, an attorney in Gray's Inn, who visited him very frequently ; that he had few other friends or ac-

quaintance; that he was a shining example of steadiness and sobriety; that he was on the sunnier side of thirty, a bachelor, and very good-looking; and that his household was comprised of a grim-visaged active old woman imported from Barlingford, a girl who ran errands, and a boy who opened the door, attended to the consulting-room, and did some mysterious work at odd times with a file and sundry queer lumps of plaster-of-paris, beeswax, and bone, in a dark little shed abutting on the yard at the back of the house. This much had the inhabitants of Fitzgeorge-street discovered respecting Mr. Sheldon when he had been amongst them four years; but they had discovered no more. He had made no local acquaintances, nor had he sought to make any. Those of his neighbours who had seen the interior of his house had entered it as patients. They left it as much pleased with Mr. Sheldon as one can be with a man at whose hands one has just undergone martyrdom, and circulated a very flattering report of the dentist's agreeable manners and delicate white handkerchief, fragrant with the odour of eau-de-

cologne. For the rest, Philip Sheldon lived his own life, and dreamed his own dreams. His opposite neighbours, who watched him on sultry summer evenings as he lounged near an open window smoking his cigar, had no more knowledge of his thoughts and fancies than they might have had if he had been a Calmuck Tartar or an Abyssinian chief.

CHAPTER II.

PHILIP SHELDON READS THE "LANCET."

FITZGEORGE-STREET was chill and dreary of aspect, under a gray March sky, when Mr. Sheldon returned to it after a week's absence from London. He had been to Little Barlingford, and had spent his brief holiday among old friends and acquaintance. The weather had not been in favour of that driving hither and thither in dog-carts, or riding rakish horses long distances to beat up old companions, which is accounted pleasure on such occasions. The blustrous winds of an unusually bitter March had buffeted Mr. Sheldon in the streets of his native town, and had almost blown him off the door-steps of his kindred. So it is scarcely strange if he returned to town looking none the better for his excursion. He looked considerably the worse for his week's ab-

sence, the old Yorkshire-woman said, as she waited upon him while he ate a chop and drank two large cups of very strong tea.

Mr. Sheldon made short work of this impromptu meal. He seemed anxious to put an end to his housekeeper's affectionate interest in himself and his health, and to get her out of the room. She had nursed him nearly thirty years before, and the recollection that she had been very familiar with him when he was a handsome black-eyed baby, with a tendency to become suddenly stiff of body and crimson of visage without any obvious provocation, inclined her to take occasional liberties now. She watched him furtively as he sat in a big high-backed arm-chair staring moodily at the struggling fire, and would fain have questioned him a little about Barlingford and Barlingford people.

But Philip Sheldon was not a man with whom even a superannuated nurse can venture to take many liberties. He was a good master, paid his servants their wages with unfailing punctuality, and gave very little trouble. But he was

the last person in the world upon whom a garrulous woman could venture to inflict her rambling discourse ; as Nancy Woolper—by courtesy, Mrs. Woolper—was fain to confess to her next-door neighbour, Mrs. Magson, when her master was the subject of an afternoon gossip. The heads of a household may inhabit a neighbourhood for years without becoming acquainted even with the outward aspect of their neighbours ; but in the lordly servants' halls of the West, or the modest kitchens of Bloomsbury, there will be interchange of civilities and friendly "droppings in" to tea or supper, let the master of the house be never so ungregarious a creature.

"You can take the tea-things, Nancy," Mr. Sheldon said presently, arousing himself suddenly from that sombre reverie in which he had been absorbed for the last ten minutes ; "I am going to be very busy to-night, and I expect Mr. George in the course of the evening. Mind I am not at home to anybody but him."

The old woman arranged the tea-things on her tray, but still kept a furtive watch on her

master, who sat with his head a little bent, and his bright black eyes fixed on the fire, with that intensity of gaze peculiar to eyes which see something far away from the object they seem to contemplate. She was in the habit of watching Mr. Sheldon rather curiously at all times, for she had never quite got over a difficulty in realising the fact that the black-eyed baby with whom she had been so intimate *could* have developed into this self-contained inflexible young man, whose thoughts were so very far away from her. To-night she watched him more intently than she was accustomed to do, for to-night there was some change in his face which she was trying, in a dim way, to account for.

He looked up from the fire suddenly, and found her eyes fixed upon him. It may be that he had been disturbed by a semi-consciousness of that curious gaze, for he looked at her angrily —“What are you staring at, Nancy?”

It was not the first time he had encountered her watchful eyes and asked the same impatient question. But Mrs. Woolper possessed that north-

country quickness of intellect which is generally equal to an emergency, and was always ready with some question or suggestion which went to prove that she had just fixed her eyes on her master, inspired by some anxiety about his interests.

"I was just a-thinking, sir," she said, meeting his stern glance unflinchingly with her little sharp gray eyes, "I was just a-thinking—you said not at home to *anyone*, except Mr. George. If it should be a person in a cab wanting their teeth out sudden—and if anything could make toothache more general in this neighbourhood it would be these March winds—if it should be a patient, sir, in a cab—"

The dentist interrupted her with a short bitter laugh.

"Neither March winds nor April showers are likely to bring me patients, Nancy, on foot or in cabs, and you ought to know it. If it's a patient, ask him in, by all means, and give him last Saturday week's *Times* to read, while I rub the rust off my forceps. There, that will

do; take your tray—or, stop; I've some news to tell you." He rose, and stood with his back to the fire and his eyes bent upon the hearth-rug, while Mrs. Woolper waited by the table, with the tray packed ready for removal. Her master kept her waiting so for some minutes, and then turned his face half away from her, and contemplated himself absently in the glass while he spoke.

"You remember Mrs. Halliday?" he asked.

"I should think I did, sir; Miss Georgina Cradock that was—Miss Georgy they called her; your first sweetheart. And how she could ever marry that big awkward Halliday is more than I can make out. Poor fondy! I suppose she was took with those great round blue eyes and red whiskers of his."

"Her mother and father were 'took' by his comfortable farmhouse, and well-stocked farm, Nancy," answered Mr. Sheldon, still contemplating himself in the glass. "Georgy had very little to do with it. She is one of those women who let other people think for them. However,

Tom is an excellent fellow, and Georgy was a lucky girl to catch such a husband. Any little flirtation there may have been between her and me was over and done with long before she married Tom. It never was more than a flirtation; and I've flirted with a good many Barlingford girls in my time, as you know, Nancy."

It was not often that Mr. Sheldon condescended to be so communicative to his housekeeper. The old woman nodded and chuckled, delighted by her master's unwonted friendliness.

"I drove over to Hyley while I was at home, Nancy," continued the dentist—he called Barlingford home still, though he had broken most of the links that had bound him to it,—“and dined with the Hallidays. Georgy is as pretty as ever, and she and Tom get on capitally."

"Any children, sir?"

"One girl," answered Mr. Sheldon carelessly. "She's at school in Scarborough, and I didn't see her; but I hear she's a fine bouncing lass. I had a very pleasant day with the Hallidays. Tom has sold his farm; that part of the world doesn't suit

him, it seems—too cold and bleak for him. He's one of those big burly-looking men who seem as if they could knock you down with a little finger, and who shiver at every puff of wind. I don't think he'll make old bones, Nancy. But that's neither here nor there. I daresay he's good for another ten years; or I'm sure I hope so, on Georgy's account."

"It was right down soft of him to sell Hyley Farm, though," said Nancy reflectively; "I've heard tell as it's the best land for forty mile round Barlingford. But he got a rare good price for it, I'll lay."

"O, yes; he sold the property uncommonly well, he tells me. You know if a north-countryman gets the chance of making a profit, he never lets it slip through his fingers."

Mrs. Woolper received this compliment to her countrymen with a gratified grin, and Mr. Sheldon went on talking, still looking at the reflection of his handsome face in the glass, and pulling his whiskers meditatively.

"Now as Tom was made for a farmer and

nothing but a farmer, he must find land somewhere in a climate that does suit him; so his friends have advised him to try a place in Devonshire or Cornwall, where he may train his myrtles and roses over his roof, and grow green peas for the London markets as late as November. There are such places to be had if he bides his time, and he's coming to town next week to look about him. So, as Georgy and he would be about as capable of taking care of themselves in London as a couple of children, I have recommended them to take up their quarters here. They'll have their lodgings for nothing, and we shall chum together, on the Yorkshire system; for of course I can't afford to keep a couple of visitors for a month at a stretch. Do you think you shall be able to manage for us, Nancy?"

"O, yes, I'll manage well-enough. I'm not one of your lazy London lasses that take half an hour to wipe a tea-cup. I'll manage easy enough. Mr. and Mrs. Halliday will be having your room, I'll lay."

"Yes; give them the best room, by all means.

I can sleep anywhere. And now go downstairs and think it over, Nancy. I must get to my work. I've some letters that must be written to-night."

Mrs. Woolper departed with her tray, gratified by her master's unwonted familiarity, and not ill pleased by the thought of visitors. They would cause a great deal of trouble, certainly; but the monotony of Nancy's easy life had grown so oppressive to her as to render the idea of any variety pleasing. And then there would be the pleasure of making that iniquitous creature the London lass bestir herself, and there would be furthermore the advantage of certain little perquisites which a clever manager always secures to herself in a house where there is much eating and drinking. Mr. Sheldon himself had lived like a modern anchorite for the last four years; and Mrs. Woolper, who was pretty well acquainted with the state of his finances, had pinched and contrived for his benefit, or rather for the benefit of the black-eyed baby she had nursed nine-and-twenty years before. For his sake she had been careful and honest, willing to forego all

the small profits to which she held herself entitled; but if well-to-do people were going to share her master's expenses, there would be no longer need for such scrupulous integrity; and if things were rightly managed, Thomas Halliday might be made to bear the entire cost of the household during his month's visit on the Yorkshire system.

While Mrs. Woolper meditated upon her domestic duties, the master of the domicile abandoned himself to reflections which were apparently of a very serious character. He brought a leathern desk from a side-table, unlocked it, and took out a quire of paper; but he made no further advance towards the writing of those letters on account of which he had dismissed his housekeeper. He sat, with his elbows on the table, nibbling the end of a wooden penholder, and staring at the opposite wall. His face looked pale and haggard in the light of the gas, and the eyes, fixed in that vacant stare, had a feverish brightness.

Mr. Sheldon was a handsome man—eminently

handsome, according to the popular notion of masculine beauty; and if the popular ideal has been a little vulgarised by the waxen gentlemen on whose finely-moulded foreheads the wig-maker is wont to display the specimens of his art, that is no discredit to Mr. Sheldon. His features were regular; the nose a handsome aquiline; the mouth firm and well modelled; the chin and jaw rather heavier than in the waxen ideal of the hair-dresser; the forehead very prominent in the region of the perceptive, but obviously wanting in the higher faculties. The eye of the phrenologist, unaided by his fingers, must have failed to discover the secrets of Mr. Sheldon's organisation; for one of the dentist's strong points was his hair, which was very luxuriant, and which he wore in artfully-arranged masses that passed for curls, but which owed their undulating grace rather to a skilful manipulation than to any natural tendency. It has been said that the rulers of the world are straight-haired men; and Mr. Sheldon might have been a Napoleon III. so far as regards this special attribute. His hair

was of a dense black, and his whiskers of the same sombre hue. These carefully-arranged whiskers were another of the dentist's strong points; and the third strong point was his teeth, the perfection whereof was a fine advertisement when considered in a professional light. The teeth were rather too large and square for a painter's or a poet's notion of beauty, and were apt to suggest an unpleasant image of some sleek brindled creature crunching human bones in an Indian jungle. But they were handsome teeth notwithstanding, and their flashing whiteness made an effective contrast to the clear sallow tint of the dentist's complexion.

Mr. Sheldon was a man of industrious habits, —fond indeed of work, and distinguished by a persistent activity in the carrying out of any labour he had planned for himself. He was not prone to the indulgence of idle reveries or agreeable day-dreams. Thought with him was labour; it was the "thinking out" of future work to be done, and it was an operation as precise and mathematical as the actual labour that resulted

therefrom. The contents of his brain were as well kept as a careful trader's ledger. He had his thoughts docketed and indexed, and rarely wasted the smallest portion of his time in searching for an idea. To-night he sat thinking until he was interrupted by a loud double-knock, which was evidently familiar to him, for he muttered "George!" pushed aside his desk, and took up his stand upon the hearthrug, ready to receive the expected visitor.

There was the sound of a man's voice below, —very like Philip Sheldon's own voice; then a quick firm tread on the stairs; and then the door was opened, and a man, who himself was very like Philip Sheldon, came into the room. This was the dentist's brother George, two years his junior. The likeness between the two men was in no way marvellous, but it was nevertheless very obvious. You could scarcely have mistaken one man for the other, but you could hardly have failed to perceive that the two men were brothers. They resembled each other more closely in form than in face. They were of the same height—

both tall and strongly built. Both had black eyes with a hard brightness in them, black whiskers, black hair, sinewy hands with prominent knuckles, square finger-tips, and bony wrists. Each man seemed the personification of savage health and vigour, smoothed and shapened in accordance with the prejudices of civilised life. Looking at these two men for the first time, you might approve or disapprove their appearance; they might impress you favourably or unfavourably; but you could scarcely fail to be reminded vaguely of strong, bright-eyed, savage creatures, beautiful and graceful after their kind, but dangerous and fatal to man.

The brothers greeted each other with a friendly nod. They were a great deal too practical to indulge in any sentimental display of fraternal affection. They liked each other very well, and were useful to each other, and took their pleasure together on those rare occasions when they were weak enough to waste time upon unprofitable pleasure; but neither of them would have comprehended the possibility of anything beyond this.

“Well, old fellow,” said George, “I’m glad you’re back again. You’re looking rather seedy, though. I suppose you knocked about a good deal down there?”

“I had a night or two of it with Halliday and the old set. He’s going it rather fast.”

“Humph!” muttered Mr. Sheldon the younger; “it’s a pity he doesn’t go it a little faster, and go off the hooks altogether, so that you might marry Georgy.”

“How do I know that Georgy would have me, if he *did* leave her a widow?” asked Philip dubiously.

“O, she’d have you fast enough. She used to be very sweet upon you before she married Tom; and even if she has forgotten all that, she’d have you if you asked her. She’d be afraid to say no. She was always more or less afraid of you, you know, Phil.”

“I don’t know about that. She was a nice little thing enough; but she knew how to drop a poor sweetheart and take up with a rich one, in spite of her simplicity.”

"O, that was the old parties' doing. Georgy would have jumped into a caldron of boiling oil if her mother and father had told her she must do it. Don't you remember when we were children together how afraid she used to be of spoiling her frocks? I don't believe she married Tom Halliday of her own free will, any more than she stood in the corner of her own free will after she'd torn her frock, as I've seen her stand twenty times. She stood in the corner because they told her she must; and she married Tom for the same reason, and I don't suppose she's been particularly happy with him."

"Well, that's her look-out," answered Philip gloomily; "I know I want a rich wife badly enough. Things are about as bad with me as they can be."

"I suppose they *are* rather piscatorial. The elderly dowagers don't come up to time, eh? Very few orders for the complete set at ten-pound-ten?"

"I took about seventy pounds last year," said the dentist, "and my expenses are something like five pounds a week. I've been making up the

deficiency out of the money I got for the Barlingford business, thinking I should be able to stand out and make a connection; but the connection gets more disconnected every year. I suppose people came to me at first for the novelty of the thing, for I had a sprinkling of decent patients for the first twelve months, or so. But now I might as well throw my money into the gutter as spend it on circulars or advertisements."

"And a young woman with twenty thousand pounds and something amiss with her jaw hasn't turned up yet?"

"No, nor an old woman either. I wouldn't stick at the age, if the money was all right," answered Mr. Sheldon bitterly.

The younger brother shrugged his shoulders and plunged his hands into his trousers-pockets with a gesture of serio-comic despair. He was the livelier of the two, and affected a slanginess of dress and talk and manner, a certain "horsey" style, very different from his elder brother's studied respectability of costume and bearing. His clothes were of a loose sporting cut, and al-

ways odorous with stale tobacco. He wore a good deal of finery in the shape of studs and pins and dangling locketts and fusee-boxes; his whiskers were more obtrusive than his brother's, and he wore a moustache in addition—a thick ragged black moustache, which would have become a guerilla chieftain rather than a dweller amidst the quiet courts and squares of Gray's Inn. His position as a lawyer was not much better than that of Philip as a dentist; but he had his own plans for making a fortune, and hoped to win for himself a larger fortune than is often made in the law. He was a hunter of genealogies, a grubber-up of forgotten facts, a joiner of broken links, a kind of legal resurrectionist, a digger in the dust and ashes of the past; and he expected in due time to dig up a treasure rich enough to reward the labour and patience of half a lifetime.

"I can afford to wait till I'm forty for my good luck," he said to his brother sometimes in moments of expansion, "and then I shall have ten years in which to enjoy myself, and twenty more in which I shall have life enough left to eat good

dinners and drink good wine, and grumble about the degeneracy of things in general, after the manner of elderly human nature."

The men stood one on each side of the hearth : George looking at his brother, Philip looking down at the fire, with his eyes shaded by their thick black lashes. The fire had become dull and hollow. George bent down presently and stirred the coals impatiently.

"If there's one thing I hate more than another—and I hate a good many things—it's a bad fire," he said. "How's Barlingford—lively as ever, I suppose?"

"Not much livelier than it was when we left it. Things have gone amiss with me in London, and I've been more than once sorely tempted to make an end of my difficulties with a razor or a few drops of prussic acid; but when I saw the dull gray streets and the square gray houses, and the empty market-place, and the Baptist chapel, and the Unitarian chapel, and the big stony church, and heard the dreary bells ding-donging for evening service, I wondered how I could ever have

existed a week in such a place. I had rather sweep a crossing in London than occupy the best house in Barlingford, and I told Tom Halliday so."

"And Tom is coming to London I understand by your letter."

"Yes, he has sold Hyley, and wants to find a place in the west of England. The north doesn't suit his chest. He and Georgy are coming up to town for a few weeks, so I've asked them to stay here. I may as well make some use of the house, for it's very little good in a professional sense."

"Humph!" muttered George; "I don't see your motive."

"I have no particular motive. Tom's a good fellow, and his company will be better than an empty house. The visit won't cost me anything—Halliday is to go shares in the housekeeping."

"Well, you may find it answer that way," replied Mr. Sheldon the younger, who considered that every action of a man's life ought to be made to "answer" in some way. "But I should think you would be rather bored by the arrangement; Tom's a very good fellow in his way, and a great

friend of mine, but he's rather an empty-headed animal."

The subject dropped here, and the brothers went on talking of Barlingford and Barlingford people—the few remaining kindred whose existence made a kind of link between the two men and their native town, and the boon companions of their early manhood. The dentist produced the remnant of a bottle of whisky from the side-board, and rang for hot water and sugar, wherewith to brew grog, for his own and his brother's refreshment; but the conversation flagged nevertheless. Philip Sheldon was dull and absent, answering his companion at random every now and then, much to that gentleman's aggravation; and he owned at last to being thoroughly tired and worn out.

"The journey from Barlingford in a slow train is no joke, you know, George, and I couldn't afford the express," he said apologetically, when his brother upbraided him for his distraction of manner.

"Then I should think you'd better go to bed,"

answered Mr. Sheldon the younger, who had smoked a couple of cigars, and consumed the contents of the whisky-bottle; "so I'll take myself off. I told you how uncommonly seedy you were looking when I first came in. When do you expect Tom and his wife?"

"At the beginning of next week."

"So soon! Well, good-night, old fellow; I shall see you before they come, I daresay. You might as well drop in upon me at my place to-morrow night. I'm hard at work on a job."

"Your old kind of work?"

"O yes. I don't get much work of any other kind."

"And I'm afraid you'll never get much good out of that."

"I don't know. A man who sits down to whist may have a run of ill-luck before he gets a decent hand; but the good cards are sure to come if he only sits long enough. Every man has his chance, depend upon it, Phil, if he knows how to watch for it; but there are so many men who get tired and go to sleep before their chances

come to them. I've wasted a good deal of time, and a good deal of labour; but the ace of trumps is in the pack, and it must turn up sooner or later. Ta-ta."

George Sheldon nodded and departed, whistling gaily as he walked away from his brother's door. Philip heard him, and turned his chair to the fire with a movement of impatience.

"You may be uncommonly clever, my dear George," soliloquised the dentist, "but you'll never make a fortune by reading wills and hunting in parish-registers for heirs-at-law. A big lump of money is not very likely to go a-begging while anyone who can fudge up the faintest pretence of a claim to it is above ground. No, no, my lad, you must find a better way than that before you'll make your fortune."

The fire had burnt low again, and Mr. Sheldon sat staring gloomily at the blackening coals. Things were very bad with him—he had not cared to confess how bad they were, when he had discussed his affairs with his brother. Those neighbours and passers-by who admired the trim

brightness of the dentist's abode had no suspicion that the master of that respectable house was in the hands of the Jews, and that the hearthstone which whitened his door-step was paid for out of Israelitish coffers. The dentist's philosophy was all of this world, and he knew that the soldier of fortune, who would fain be a conqueror in the great battle, must needs keep his plumage undrabbled and the golden facings of his uniform untarnished, let his wounds be never so desperate.

Having found his attempt to establish a practice in Fitzgeorge-street a failure, the only course open to Mr. Sheldon, as a man of the world, was to transfer his failure to somebody else, with more or less profit to himself. To this end he preserved the spotless purity of his muslin curtains, though the starch that stiffened them and the bleaching-powder that whitened them were bought with money for which he was to pay sixty per cent. To this end he nursed that wan shadow of a practice, and sustained that appearance of respectability which, in a world where appearance

stands for so much, is in itself a kind of capital. It certainly was dull dreary work to hold the citadel of No. 14 Fitzgeorge-street against the besieger Poverty ; but the dentist stood his ground pertinaciously, knowing that if he only waited long enough, the dupe who was to be his victim would come, and knowing also that there might arrive a day when it would be very useful for him to be able to refer to four years' unblemished respectability as a Bloomsbury householder. He had his lines set in several shady places for that unhappy fish with a small capital, and he had been tantalised by more than one nibble ; but he made no open show of his desire to sell his business—since a business that is obviously in the market seems scarcely worth any man's purchase.

Things had of late grown worse with him every day ; for every interval of twenty-four hours sinks a man so much the deeper in the mire when renewed accommodation-bills with his name upon them are ripening in the iron safes of Judah. Philip Sheldon found himself sinking

gradually and almost imperceptibly into that bottomless pit of difficulty in whose black depths the demon Insolvency holds his dreary court. While his little capital lasted he had kept himself clear of debt, but that being exhausted, and his practice growing worse day by day, he had been fain to seek assistance from money-lenders; and now even the money-lenders were tired of him. The chair in which he sat, the poker which he swung slowly to and fro, as he bent over his hearth, were not his own. One of his Jewish creditors had a bill of sale on his furniture, and he might come home any day to find the auctioneer's bills plastered against the wall of his house, and the auctioneer's clerk busy with the catalogue of his possessions. If the expected victim came now to buy his practice, the sacrifice would be made too late to serve his interest. The men who had lent him money would be the sole gainers by the bargain.

Seldom does a man find himself face to face with a blacker prospect than that which lay before Philip Sheldon; and yet his manner to-night was

not the dull blank apathy of despair. It was the manner of a man whose brain is occupied by busy thoughts; who has some elaborate scheme to map out and arrange before he is called upon to carry his plans into action.

“It would be a good business for me,” he muttered, “if I had pluck enough to carry it through.”

The fire went out as he sat swinging the poker backwards and forwards. The clocks of Bloomsbury and St. Pancras struck twelve, and still Philip Sheldon pondered and plotted by that dreary hearth. The servants had retired at eleven, after a good deal of blundering with bars and shutters, and unnecessary banging of doors. That unearthly silence peculiar to houses after midnight reigned in Mr. Sheldon’s domicile, and he could hear the voices of distant roisterers, and the miauling of neighbouring cats, with a painful distinctness, as he sat brooding in his silent room. The fact that a mahogany cheffonier in a corner gave utterance to a faint groan occasionally, as of some feeble creature in pain,

afforded him no annoyance. He was superior to superstitious fancies, and all the rappings and scratchings of spirit-land would have failed to disturb his equanimity. He was a strictly practical man—one of those men who are always ready, with a stump of lead-pencil and the back of a letter, to reduce everything in creation to figures.

"I had better read-up that business before they come," he said, when he had to all appearance "thought out" the subject of his reverie. "No time so good as this for doing it quietly. One never knows who is spying about in the daytime."

He looked at his watch, and then went to a cupboard, where there were bundles of wood and matches and old newspapers,—for it was his habit to light his own fire occasionally when he worked unusually late at night or early in the morning. He relighted his fire now as cleverly as any housemaid in Bloomsbury, and stood watching it till it burned briskly. Then he lit a taper, and went downstairs to the professional torture-chamber. The tall horsehair chair looked un-

utterably awful in the dim glimmer of the taper, and a nervous person could almost have fancied it occupied by the ghost of some patient who had expired under the agony of the forceps. Mr. Sheldon lighted the gas in a movable branch which he was in the habit of turning almost into the mouths of the patients who consulted him at night. There was a cupboard on each side of the mantelpiece, and it was in these two cupboards that the dentist kept his professional library. His books did not form a very valuable collection, but he kept the cupboards constantly locked nevertheless.

He took the key from his waistcoat-pocket, opened one of the cupboards, and selected a book from a row of dingy-looking volumes. He carried the book to the room above, where he seated himself under the gas, and opened the volume at a place in which there was a scrap of paper, evidently left there as a mark. The book was a volume of the *Lancet*, and in this book he read with close attention until the Bloomsbury clocks struck three.

CHAPTER III.

MR. AND MRS. HALLIDAY.

MR. SHELDON'S visitors arrived in due course. They were provincial people of the middle-class, accounted monstrously genteel in their own neighbourhood, but in no wise resembling Londoners of the same rank.

Mr. Thomas Halliday was a big, loud-spoken, good-tempered Yorkshireman, who had inherited a comfortable little estate from a plodding, money-making father, and for whom life had been very easy. He was a farmer, and nothing but a farmer; a man for whom the supremest pleasure of existence was a cattle-show or a country horse-fair. The farm upon which he had been born and brought up was situated about six miles from Barlingford, and all the delights of his boyhood and youth were associated with that small

market-town. He and the two Sheldons had been schoolfellows, and afterwards boon companions, taking such pleasure as was obtainable in Barlingford together; flirting with the same provincial beauties at prim tea-parties in the winter, and getting up friendly picnics in the summer,—picnics at which eating and drinking were the leading features of the day's entertainment. Mr. Halliday had always regarded George and Philip Sheldon with that reverential admiration which a stupid man, who is conscious of his own mental inferiority, generally feels for a clever friend and companion. But he was also fully aware of the advantage which a rich man possesses over a poor one, and would not have exchanged the fertile acres of Hyley for the intellectual gifts of his schoolfellows. He had found the substantial value of his comfortably-furnished house and well-stocked farm when he and his friend Philip Sheldon became suitors for the hand of Georgina Cradock, youngest daughter of a Barlingford attorney, who lived next door to the Barlingford dentist, Philip Sheldon's father. Philip

and the girl had been playfellows in the long walled gardens behind the two houses, and there had been a brotherly and sisterly intimacy between the juvenile members of the two families. But when Philip and Georgina met at the Barlingford tea-parties in later years, the parental powers frowned upon any renewal of that childish friendship. Miss Cradock had no portion, and the worthy solicitor her father was a prudent man, who was apt to look for the promise of domestic happiness in the plate-basket and the linen-press, rather than for such superficial qualifications as black whiskers and white teeth. So poor Philip was "thrown over the bridge" as he said himself, and Georgy Cradock married Mr. Halliday, with all attendant ceremony and splendour, according to the "lights" of Barlingford gentry.

But this provincial bride's story was no passionate record of anguish and tears. The Barlingford Juliet had liked Romeo as much as she was capable of liking anyone; but when Papa Capulet insisted on her union with Paris,

she accepted her destiny with decent resignation, and, in the absence of any sympathetic father confessor, was fain to seek consolation from a more mundane individual in the person of the Barlingford milliner. Nor did Philip Sheldon give evidence of any extravagant despair. His father was something of a doctor as well as a dentist; and there were plenty of dark little phials lurking on the shelves of his surgery in which the young man could have found "mortal drugs," without the aid of the apothecary, had he been so minded. Happily no such desperate idea ever occurred to him in connection with his grief. He held himself sulkily aloof from Mr. and Mrs. Halliday for some time after their marriage, and allowed people to see that he considered himself very hardly used; but prudence, which had always been Philip Sheldon's counsellor, proved herself also his consoler in this crisis of his life. A careful consideration of his own interests led him to perceive that the successful result of his love-suit would have been about the worst thing that could have happened to him.

Georgina had no money. All was said in that. As the young dentist's worldly wisdom ripened with experience, he discovered that the worldly ease of the best man in Barlingford was something like that of a canary-bird who inhabits a clean cage and is supplied with abundant seed and water. The cage is eminently comfortable, and the sleepy, respectable, elderly bird sighs for no better abiding-place, no wider prospect than that patch of the universe which he sees between the bars. But now and then there is hatched a wild young fledgling, which beats its wings against the inexorable wires, and would fain soar away into that wide outer world, to prosper or perish in its freedom.

Before Georgy had been married a year, her sometime lover had fully resigned himself to the existing state of things, and was on the best possible terms with his friend Tom. He could eat his dinner in the comfortable house at Hyley with an excellent appetite ; for there was a gulf between him and his old love far wider than any that had been dug by that ceremonial in the parish-church

of Barlingford. Philip Sheldon had awakened to the consciousness that life in his native town was little more than a kind of animal vegetation—the life of some pulpy invertebrate creature, which sprawls helplessly upon the sands whereon the wave has deposited it, and may be cloven in half without feeling itself noticeably worse for the operation. He had awakened to the knowledge that there was a wider and more agreeable world beyond that little provincial borough, and that a handsome face and figure and a vigorous intellect were commodities for which there must be some kind of market.

Once convinced of the utter worthlessness of his prospects in Barlingford, Mr. Sheldon turned his eyes Londonwards; and his father happening at the same time very conveniently to depart this life, Philip, the son and heir, disposed of the business to an aspiring young practitioner, and came to the metropolis, where he made that futile attempt to establish himself which has been described.

The dentist had wasted four years in London,

and ten years had gone by since Georgy's wedding; and now for the first time he had an opportunity of witnessing the domestic happiness or the domestic misery of the woman who had jilted him, and the man who had been his successful rival. He set himself to watch them with the cool deliberation of a social anatomist, and he experienced very little difficulty in the performance of this moral dissection. They were established under his roof, his companions at every meal; and they were the kind of people who discuss their grievances and indulge in their "little differences" with perfect freedom in the presence of a third, or a fourth, or even a fifth party.

Mr. Sheldon was wise enough to preserve a strict neutrality. He would take up a newspaper at the beginning of a little difference, and lay it down when the little difference was finished, with the most perfect assumption of unconsciousness; but it is doubtful whether the matrimonial disputants were sufficiently appreciative of this good breeding. They would have liked to have had

Mr. Sheldon for a court of appeal; and a little interference from him would have given zest to their quarrels. Meanwhile Philip watched them slyly from the covert of his newspaper, and formed his own conclusions about them. If he was pleased to see that his false love's path was not entirely rose-bestrewn, or if he rejoiced at beholding the occasional annoyance of his rival, he allowed no evidence of his pleasure to appear in his face or manner.

Georgina Cradock's rather insipid prettiness had developed into matronly comeliness. Her fair complexion and pink cheeks had lost none of their freshness. Her smooth auburn hair was as soft and bright as it had been when she had braided it preparatory to a Barlingford tea-party in the days of her spinsterhood. She was a pretty, weak little woman, whose education had never gone beyond the routine of a provincial boarding-school, and who believed that she had attained all necessary wisdom in having mastered Pinnock's abridgments of Goldsmith's histories and the rudiments of the French language. She was a woman who thought that the perfection of feminine costume

was a moire-antique dress and a conspicuous gold-chain. She was a woman who considered a well-furnished house and a horse and gig the highest form of earthly splendour or prosperity.

This was the shallow commonplace creature whom Philip Sheldon had once admired and wooed. He looked at her now, and wondered how he could ever have felt even as much as he had felt on her account. But he had little leisure to devote to any such abstract and useless consideration. He had his own affairs to think about, and they were very desperate.

In the mean time Mr. and Mrs. Halliday occupied themselves in the pursuit of pleasure or business, as the case might be. They were eager for amusement: went to exhibitions in the day and to theatres at night, and came home to cozy little suppers in Fitzgeorge-street, after which Mr. Halliday was wont to waste the small hours in friendly conversation with his quondam companion, and in the consumption of much brandy-and-water.

Unhappily for Georgy, these halcyon days

were broken by intervals of storm and cloud. The weak little woman was afflicted with that intermittent fever called jealousy; and the stalwart Thomas was one of those men who can scarcely give the time of day to a feminine acquaintance without some ornate and loud-spoken gallantry. Having no intellectual resources wherewith to beguile the tedium of his idle prosperous life, he was fain to seek pleasure in the companionship of other men; and had thus become a haunter of tavern-parlours and small race-courses, being always ready for any amusement his friends proposed to him. It followed, therefore, that he was very often absent from his commonplace, substantial home and his pretty weak-minded wife. And poor Georgy had ample food for her jealous fears and suspicions; for where might a man not be who was so seldom at home? She had never been particularly fond of her husband, but that was no reason why she should not be particularly jealous about him; and her jealousy betrayed itself in a peevish worrying fashion, which was harder to bear than the vengeful fero-

city of a Clytemnestra. It was in vain that Thomas Halliday and those jolly good fellows his friends and companions attested the Arcadian innocence of race-courses, and the perfect purity of that smoky atmosphere peculiar to tavern-parlours. Georgy's suspicions were too vague for refutation; but they were nevertheless sufficient ground for all the alternations of temper—from stolid sulkiness to peevish whining, from murmured lamentations to loud hysterics—to which the female temperament is liable.

In the mean time poor honest, loud-spoken Tom did all in his power to demonstrate his truth and devotion. He bought his wife as many stiff silk-gowns and gaudy Barlingford bonnets as she chose to sigh for. He made a will, in which she was sole legatee, and insured his life in different offices to the amount of five thousand pounds.

“I'm the sort of fellow that's likely to go off the hooks suddenly, you know, Georgy,” he said, “and your poor dad was always anxious I should make things square for you. I don't suppose

you're likely to marry again, my lass, so I've no need to tie up Lottie's little fortune. I must trust someone, and I'd better confide in my own little wife than in some canting methodistical fellow of a trustee, who would speculate my daughter's money upon some Stock-Exchange hazard, and levant to Australia when it was all swamped. If you can't trust me, Georgy, I'll let you see that I can trust you," added Tom reproachfully.

Whereupon poor weak little Mrs. Halliday murmured plaintively that she did not want fortunes or life-insurances, but that she wanted her husband to stay at home, content with the calm and rather sleepy delights of his own fireside. Poor Tom was wont to promise amendment, and would keep his promise faithfully so long as no supreme temptation, in the shape of a visit from some friend of the jolly-good-fellow species, arose to vanquish his good resolutions. But a good-tempered, generous-hearted young man who farms his own land, has three or four good horses in his stable, a decent cellar of honest port and sherry—

“none of your wishy-washy sour stuff in the way of hock or claret,” cried Tom Halliday—and a very comfortable balance at his banker’s, finds it no easy matter to shake off friends of the jolly-good-fellow fraternity.

In London Mr. Halliday found the spirit of jolly-dog-ism rampant. George Sheldon had always been his favourite of the two brothers; and it was George who lured him from the safe shelter of Fitzgeorge-street and took him to mysterious haunts, whence he returned long after midnight, boisterous of manner and unsteady of gait, and with garments reeking of stale tobacco-smoke.

He was always good-tempered, even after these diabolical orgies on some unknown Brocken, and protested indistinctly that there was no harm “’pon m’ wor’, ye know, ol’ gur’! Geor’ an’ me—half-doz’ oyst’r—c’gar—botl’ p’l ale—str’t home,” and much more to the same effect. When did any married man ever take *more* than half-a-dozen oysters—or take any undomestic pleasure for his *own* satisfaction? It is always those incorrigible bachelors, Thomas, Richard, or Henry,

who hinder the unwilling Benedict from returning to his sacred Lares and Penates.

Poor Georgy was not to be pacified by protestations about oysters and cigars from the lips of a husband who was thick of utterance, and who betrayed a general imbecility of mind and unsteadiness of body. This London excursion, which had begun in sunshine, threatened to end in storm and darkness. George Sheldon and his set had taken possession of the young farmer ; and Georgy had no better amusement in the long blustrous March evenings than to sit at her work under the flaming gas in Mr. Sheldon's drawing-room, while that gentleman—who rarely joined in the dissipations of his friend and his brother—occupied himself with mechanical dentistry in the chamber of torture below.

Fitzgeorge-street in general, always on the watch to discover evidences of impecuniosity or doubtful morality on the part of any one citizen in particular, could find no food for scandal in the visit of Mr. and Mrs. Halliday to their friend and countryman. It had been noised abroad, through

the agency of Mrs. Woolper, that Mr. Sheldon had been a suitor for the lady's hand, and had been jilted by her. The Fitzgeorgians had been, therefore, especially on the alert to detect any sign of backsliding in the dentist. There would have been much pleasant discussion in kitchens and back-parlours if Mr. Sheldon had been particularly attentive to his fair guest; but it speedily became known, always by the agency of Mrs. Woolper and that phenomenon of idleness and iniquity, the London "girl," that Mr. Sheldon was not by any means attentive to the pretty young woman from Yorkshire—but that he suffered her to sit alone hour after hour in her husband's absence—with no amusement but her needlework wherewith to "pass the time," while he scraped and filed and polished those fragments of bone which were to assist in the renovation of decayed beauty.

The third week of Mr. and Mrs. Halliday's visit was near its close, and as yet the young farmer had arrived at no decision as to the subject which had brought him to London. The sale of

Hyley Farm was an accomplished fact; and the purchase-money duly bestowed at Tom's banker's; but very little had been done towards finding the new property which was to be a substitute for the estate his father and grandfather had farmed before him. He had seen auctioneers, and had brought home plans of estates in Herefordshire and Devonshire, Cornwall and Somersetshire, all of which seemed to be, in their way, the most perfect things imaginable—land of such fertility as one would scarcely expect to find out of Arcadia—live stock which seemed beyond all price, to be taken at a valuation—roads and surrounding neighbourhood unparalleled in beauty and convenience—outbuildings that must have been the very archetypes of barns and stables—a house which to inhabit would be to adore. But as yet he had seen none of these peerless domains. He was waiting for decent weather in which to run down to the West and “look about him,” as he said to himself. In the mean time the blustrous March weather, which was so unsuited to long railroad journeys, and all that waiting about at

junctions and at little windy stations on branch-lines, incidental to the inspection of estates scattered over a large area of country, served very well for "jolly-dog-ism"—and what with a hand at cards in George Sheldon's chambers, and another hand at cards in somebody else's chambers, and a run down to an early meeting at Newmarket, and an evening at some rooms where there was something to be seen which was as near prize-fighting as the law allowed, and other evenings in unknown regions, Mr. Halliday found time slipping by him, and his domestic peace vanishing away.

It was on an evening at the end of this third week that Mr. Sheldon abandoned his mechanical dentistry for once in a way, and ascended to the drawing-room, where poor Georgy sat busy with that eternal needlework, but for which melancholy madness would surely overtake many desolate matrons in houses whose commonplace comfort and respectable dulness are more dismal than the picturesque dreariness of a moated grange amid the Lincolnshire fens. To the masculine mind this needlework seems nothing more than a pur-

poseless stabbing and sewing of strips of calico ; but to lonely womanhood it is the prison-flower of the captive, it is the spider of Latude.

Mr. Sheldon brought his guest an evening newspaper.

“ There’s an account of the opening of Parliament,” he said, “ which you may perhaps like to see. I wish I had a piano, or some female acquaintances to drop in upon you. I’m afraid you must be dull in these long evenings when Tom is out of the way.”

“ I am indeed dull,” Mrs. Halliday answered peevishly ; “ and if Tom cared for me, he wouldn’t leave me like this evening after evening. But he doesn’t care for me.”

Mr. Sheldon laid down the newspaper, and seated himself opposite his guest. He sat for a few minutes in silence, beating time to some imaginary air with the tips of his fingers on the old-fashioned mahogany table. Then he said, with a half-smile upon his face :

“ But surely Tom is the best of husbands ! He has been a little wild since his coming to

London, I know; but then you see he doesn't often come to town."

"He's just as bad in Yorkshire," Georgy answered gloomily; "he is always going to Barlingford with somebody or other, or to meet some of his old friends. I'm sure, if I had known what he was, I would never have married him."

"Why, I thought he was such a good husband. He was telling me only a few days ago how he had made a will leaving you every sixpence he possesses, without reservation, and how he has insured his life for five thousand pounds."

"O yes, I know that; but I don't call *that* being a good husband. I don't want him to leave me his money. I don't want him to die. I want him to stay at home."

"Poor Tom! I'm afraid he's not the sort of man for that kind of thing. He likes change and amusement. You married a rich man, Mrs. Halliday; you made your choice, you know, without regard to the feelings of anyone else. You sacrificed truth and honour to your own inclination, or your own interest, I do not know, and I do not

ask which. If the bargain has turned out a bad one, that's your look-out."

Philip Sheldon sat with his folded arms resting on the little table and his eyes fixed on Georgy's face. They could be very stern and hard and cruel, those bright black eyes, and Mrs. Halliday grew first red and then pale under their searching gaze. She had seen Mr. Sheldon very often during the years of her married life, but this was the first time he had ever said anything to her that sounded like a reproach. The dentist's eyes softened a little as he watched her, not with any special tenderness, but with an expression of half-disdainful compassion—such as a strong stern man might feel for a foolish child. He could see that this woman was afraid of him, and it served his interests that she should fear him. He had a purpose in everything he did, and his purpose tonight was to test the strength of his influence over Georgina Halliday. In the old time before her marriage that influence had been very strong. It was for him to discover now whether it still endured.

"You made your choice, Mrs. Halliday," he

went on presently, “and it was a choice which all prudent people must have approved. What chance had a man, who was only heir to a practice worth four or five hundred pounds, against the inheritor of Hyley Farm with its two hundred and fifty acres, and three thousand pounds’ worth of live stock, plant, and working capital? When do the prudent people ever stop to consider truth and honour, or old promises, or an affection that dates from childhood? They calculate everything by pounds, shillings, and pence; and according to their mode of reckoning you were in the right when you jilted me to marry Tom Halliday.”

Georgy laid down her work and took out her handkerchief. She was one of those women who take refuge in tears when they find themselves at a disadvantage. Tears had always melted honest Tom, was his wrath never so dire, and tears would no doubt subdue Philip Sheldon.

But Georgy had to discover that the dentist was made of a stuff very different from that softer clay which composed the rollicking good-tempered farmer. Mr. Sheldon watched her tears with the

cold blooded deliberation of a scientific experimentalist. He was glad to find that he could make her cry. She was a necessary instrument in the working out of certain plans that he had made for himself, and he was anxious to discover whether she was likely to be a plastic instrument. He knew that her love for him had never been worth much at its best, and that the poor little flickering flame had been utterly extinguished by nine years of commonplace domesticity and petty jealousy. But his purpose was one that would be served as well by her fear as by her love, and he had set himself to-night to gauge his power in relation to this poor weak creature.

“It’s very unkind of you to say such dreadful things, Mr. Sheldon,” she whimpered presently; “you know very well that my marriage with Tom was pa’s doing, and not mine. I’m sure if I’d known how he would stay out night after night, and come home in such dreadful states time after time, I never would have consented to marry him.”

“Wouldn’t you?—O yes, you would. If you were a widow to-morrow, and free to marry again,

you would choose just such another man as Tom—a man who laughs loud, and pays flourishing compliments, and drives a gig with a high-stepping horse. That's the sort of man women like, and that's the sort of man you'd marry."

"I'm sure I shouldn't marry at all," answered Mrs. Halliday, in a voice that was broken by little gasping sobs. "I have seen enough of the misery of married life. But I don't want Tom to die, unkind as he is to me. People are always saying that he won't make old bones—how horrid it is to talk of a person's bones!—and I'm sure I sometimes make myself wretched about him, as he knows, though he doesn't thank me for it."

And here Mrs. Halliday's sobs got the better of her utterance, and Mr. Sheldon was fain to say something of a consolatory nature.

"Come, come," he said, "I won't tease you any more. That's against the laws of hospitality, isn't it?—only there are some things which you can't expect a man to forget, you know. However, let bygones be bygones. As for poor old Tom, I daresay he'll live to be a hale, hearty old

man, in spite of the croakers. People always will croak about something ; and it's a kind of fashion to say that a big, hearty, six-foot man is a fragile blossom likely to be nipped by any wintry blast. Come, come, Mrs. Halliday, your husband mustn't discover that I've been making you cry when he comes home. He may be home early this evening, perhaps ; and if he is, we'll have an oyster supper, and a chat about old times."

Mrs. Halliday shook her head dolefully.

"It's past ten o'clock already," she said, "and I don't suppose Tom will be home till after twelve. He doesn't like my sitting up for him ; but I wonder *what* time he would come home if I didn't sit up for him ?"

"Let's hope for the best," exclaimed Mr. Sheldon cheerfully. "I'll go and see about the oysters."

"Don't get them for me, or for Tom," protested Mrs. Halliday ; "he will have had his supper when he comes home, you may be sure, and I couldn't eat a morsel of anything."

To this resolution Mrs. Halliday adhered ; so

the dentist was fain to abandon all jovial ideas in relation to oysters and pale ale. But he did not go back to his mechanical dentistry. He sat opposite his visitor, and watched her, silently and thoughtfully, for some time as she worked. She had brushed away her tears, but she looked very peevish and miserable, and took out her watch several times in an hour. Mr. Sheldon made two or three feeble attempts at conversation, but the talk languished and expired on each occasion, and they sat on in silence.

Little by little the dentist's attention seemed to wander away from his guest. He wheeled his chair round, and sat looking at the fire, with the same fixed gloom upon his face which had darkened it on the night of his return from Yorkshire. Things had been so desperate with him of late, that he had lost his old orderly habit of thinking out a business at one sitting, and making an end of all deliberation and hesitation about it. There were subjects that forced themselves upon his thoughts, and certain ideas which repeated themselves with a stupid persistence. He was such an

eminently practical man, that this disorder of his brain troubled him more even than the thoughts that made the disorder. He sat in the same attitude for a long while, scarcely conscious of Mrs. Halliday's presence, not at all conscious of the progress of time.

Georgy had been right in her gloomy forebodings of bad behaviour on the part of Mr. Halliday. It was nearly one o'clock when a loud double knock announced that gentleman's return. The wind had been howling drearily, and a sharp, slanting rain had been pattering against the windows for the last half-hour, while Mrs. Halliday's breast had been racked by the contending emotions of anxiety and indignation.

"I suppose he couldn't get a cab," she exclaimed, as the knock startled her from her listening attitude; for however intently a midnight watcher may be listening for the returning wanderer's knock, it is not the less startling when it comes. "And he has walked home through the wet, and now he'll have a violent cold, I daresay," added Georgy peevishly.

“Then it’s lucky for him he’s in a doctor’s house,” answered Mr. Sheldon, with a smile. He was a handsome man no doubt, according to the popular idea of masculine perfection, but he had *not* a pleasant smile. “I went through the regular routine, you know, and am as well able to see a patient safely through a cold or a fever as I am to make him a set of teeth.”

Mr. Halliday burst into the room at this moment, singing a fragment of the “Chough and Crow” chorus, very much out of tune. He was in boisterously high spirits, and very little the worse for liquor. He had only walked from Covent Garden, he said, and had taken nothing but a tankard of stout and a Welsh rarebit. He had been hearing the divinest singing—boys with the voices of angels—and had been taking his supper in a place which duchesses themselves did not disdain to peep at from the sacred recesses of a *loge grillée*, George Sheldon had told him. But poor country-bred Georgina Halliday would not believe in the duchesses, or the angelic singing boys, or the primitive simplicity of Welsh

rarebits. She had a vision of beautiful women, and halls of dazzling light; where there was the mad music of perpetual post-horn galops, with a riotous accompaniment of huzzas, and the popping of champagne corks; where the sheen of satin and the glitter of gems bewildered the eye of the beholder. She had seen such a picture once on the stage, and had vaguely associated it with all Tom's midnight roisterings ever afterwards.

The roisterer's garments were very wet, and it was in vain that his wife and Philip Sheldon entreated him to change them for dry ones, or to go to bed immediately. He stood before the fire relating his innocent adventures, and trying to dispel the cloud from Georgy's fair young brow; and, when he did at last consent to go to his room, the dentist shook his head ominously.

"You'll have a severe cold to-morrow, depend upon it, Tom, and you'll have yourself to thank for it," he said, as he bade the good-tempered reprobate good-night.

"Never mind, old fellow," answered Tom; "if I am ill, you shall nurse me. If one is doomed

to die by doctor's stuff, it's better to have a doctor one does know than a doctor one doesn't know for one's executioner."

After which graceful piece of humour Mr. Halliday went blundering up the staircase, followed by his aggrieved wife.

Philip Sheldon stood on the landing looking after his visitors for some minutes. Then he went slowly back to the sitting-room, where he replenished the fire, and seated himself before it with a newspaper in his hand.

"What's the use of going to bed, if I can't sleep?" he muttered, in a discontented tone.

CHAPTER IV.

A PERPLEXING ILLNESS.

MR. SHIELDON'S prophecy was fully realised. Tom Halliday awoke the next day with a violent cold in his head. Like most big boisterous men of herculean build, he was the veriest craven in the hour of physical ailment; so he succumbed at once to the malady which a man obliged to face the world and fight for his daily bread must needs have made light of.

The dentist rallied his invalid friend.

"Keep your bed, if you like, Tom," he said, "but there's no necessity for any such coddling. As your hands are hot, and your tongue rather queer, I may as well give you a saline draught. You'll be all right by dinner-time, and I'll get George to look round in the evening for a hand at cards."

Tom obeyed his professional friend—took his medicine, read the paper, and slept away the best part of the dull March day. At half-past five he got up and dressed for dinner, and the evening passed very pleasantly; so pleasantly, indeed, that Georgy was half-inclined to wish that her husband might be afflicted with chronic influenza, whereby he would be compelled to stop at home. She sighed when Philip Sheldon slapped his friend's broad shoulder, and told him cheerily that he would be "all right to-morrow." He would be well again, and there would be more midnight roistering, and she would be again tormented by that vision of lighted halls and beautiful diabolical creatures revolving madly to the music of the Post-horn Galop.

It seemed, however, that poor jealous Mrs. Halliday was to be spared her nightly agony for some time to come. Tom's cold lasted longer than he had expected, and the cold was succeeded by a low fever—a bilious fever, Mr. Sheldon said. There was not the least occasion for alarm, of course. The invalid and the invalid's wife trusted

implicitly in the friendly doctor, who assured them both that Tom's attack was the most ordinary kind of thing; a little wearing, no doubt, but entirely without danger. He had to repeat this assurance very often to Georgy, whose angry feelings had given place to extreme tenderness and affection now that Tom was an invalid, quite unfitted for the society of jolly-good-fellows, and willing to receive basins of beef-tea and arrow-root meekly from his wife's hands, instead of those edibles of iniquity, oysters and toasted cheese.

Mr. Halliday's illness was very tiresome. It was one of those perplexing complaints which keep the patient himself, and the patient's friends and attendants, in perpetual uncertainty. A little worse one day and a shade better the next; now gaining a little strength, now losing a trifle more than he had gained. The patient declined in so imperceptible a manner, that he had been ill three weeks, and was no longer able to leave his bed, and had lost alike his appetite and his spirits, before Georgy awoke to the fact that this

illness, hitherto considered so lightly, must be very serious.

“I think if—if you have no objection, I should like to see another doctor, Mr. Sheldon,” she said, one day, with considerable embarrassment of manner. She feared to offend her host by any doubt of his skill. “You see—you—you are so much employed with teeth—and—of course you know I am quite assured of your talent—but don’t you think that a doctor who had more experience in fever cases might bring Tom round quicker? He has been ill so long now; and really he doesn’t seem to get any better.”

Philip Sheldon shrugged his shoulders.

“As you please, my dear Mrs. Halliday,” he said carelessly; “I don’t wish to press my services upon you. It is quite a matter of friendship, you know, and I shall not profit sixpence by my attendance on poor old Tom. Call in another doctor, by all means, if you think fit to do so; but, of course, in that event, I must withdraw from the case. The man you call in may be clever, or he may be stupid and ignorant. It’s

all a chance, when one doesn't know one's man ; and I really can't advise you upon that point, for I know nothing of the London profession."

Georgy looked alarmed. This was a new view of the subject. She had fancied that all regular practitioners were clever, and had only doubted Mr. Sheldon because he was not a regular practitioner. But how if she were to withdraw her husband from the hands of a clever man to deliver him into the care of an ignorant pretender, simply because she was over-anxious for his recovery?

"I always am foolishly anxious about things," she thought.

And then she looked piteously at Mr. Sheldon, and said, "What do you think I ought to do? Pray tell me. He has eaten no breakfast again this morning ; and even the cup of tea which I persuaded him to take seemed to disagree with him. And then there is that dreadful sore throat which torments him so. What ought I to do, Mr. Sheldon?"

"Whatever seems best to yourself, Mrs. Halliday," answered the dentist earnestly. "It is a

subject upon which I cannot pretend to advise you. It is a matter of feeling rather than of reason, and it is a matter which you yourself must determine. If I knew any man whom I could honestly recommend to you, it would be another affair: but I don't. Tom's illness is the simplest thing in the world, and I feel myself quite competent to pull him through it, without fuss or bother; but if you think otherwise, pray put me out of the question. There's one fact, however, of which I'm bound to remind you. Like many fine big stalwart fellows of his stamp, your husband is as nervous as a hysterical woman; and if you call in a strange doctor, who will pull long faces, and put on the professional solemnity, the chances are that he'll take alarm, and do himself more mischief in a few hours than your new adviser can undo in as many weeks."

There was a little pause after this. Georgy's opinions, and suspicions, and anxieties were alike vague; and this last suggestion of Mr. Sheldon's put things in a new and alarming light. She was really anxious about her husband, but she had

been accustomed all her life to accept the opinion of other people in preference to her own.

“Do you really think that Tom will soon be well and strong again?” she asked presently.

“If I thought otherwise, I should be the first to advise other measures. However, my dear Mrs. Halliday, call in someone else, for your own satisfaction.”

“No,” said Georgy, sighing plaintively, “it might frighten Tom. You are quite right, Mr. Sheldon; he is very nervous, and the idea that I was alarmed might alarm him. I’ll trust in you. Pray try to bring him round again. You will try, won’t you?” she asked, in the childish pleading way which was peculiar to her.

The dentist was searching for something in the drawer of a table, and his back was turned on that anxious questioner.

“You may depend upon it, I’ll do my best, Mrs. Halliday,” he answered, still busy at the drawer.

Mr. Sheldon the younger had paid many visits

to Fitzgeorge-street during Tom Halliday's illness. George and Tom had been the Damon and Pythias of Barlingford: and George seemed really distressed when he found his friend changed for the worse. The changes in the invalid were so puzzling, the alternations from better to worse, and from worse to better, so frequent, that fear could take no hold upon the minds of the patient's friends. It seemed such a very slight affair this low fever, though sufficiently inconvenient to the patient himself, who suffered a good deal from thirst and sickness, and showed an extreme disinclination for food, all which symptoms Mr. Sheldon said were the commonest and simplest features of a very mild attack of bilious fever, which would leave Tom a better man than it had found him.

There had been several pleasant little card-parties during the earlier stages of Mr. Halliday's illness; but within the last week the patient had been too low and weak for cards; too weak to read the newspaper, or even to bear having it read to him. When George came to look at his old friend, "to cheer you up a little, old fellow, you

know," and so on, he found Tom, for the time being, past all capability of being cheered, even by the genial society of his favourite jolly-good-fellow, or by tidings of a steeple-chase in Yorkshire, in which a neighbour had gone to grief over a double fence.

"That chap upstairs seems rather queerish," George had said to his brother, after finding Tom lower and weaker than usual. "He's in a bad way, isn't he, Phil?"

"No; there's nothing serious the matter with him. He's rather low to-night, that's all."

"Rather low!" echoed George Sheldon. "He seems to me so very low, that he can't sink much lower without going to the bottom of his grave. I'd call someone in, if I were you."

The dentist shrugged his shoulders, and made a little contemptuous noise with his lips.

"If you knew as much of doctors as I do, you wouldn't be in any hurry to trust a friend to the mercy of one," he said carelessly. "Don't you alarm yourself about Tom. He's right enough. He's been in a state of chronic over-eating and

over-drinking for the last ten years, and this bilious fever will be the making of him."

"Will it?" said George doubtfully; and then there followed a little pause, during which the brothers happened to look at each other furtively, and happened to surprise each other in the act.

"I don't know about over-eating or drinking," said George presently; "but *something* has disagreed with Tom Halliday, that's very evident."

CHAPTER V.

THE LETTER FROM THE "ALLIANCE" OFFICE.

UPON the evening of the day on which Mrs. Halliday and the dentist had discussed the propriety of calling in a strange doctor, George Sheldon came again to see his sick friend. He was quicker to perceive the changes in the invalid than the members of the household, who saw him daily and hourly, and he perceived a striking change for the worse to-night.

He took care, however, to suffer no evidence of alarm or surprise to appear in the sick chamber. He talked to his friend in the usual cheery way; sat by the bed-side for half-an-hour; did his best to arouse Tom from a kind of stupid lethargy, and to encourage Mrs. Halliday, who shared the task of nursing her husband with brisk Nancy Woolper, an invaluable creature in a sick-room. But he

failed in both attempts; the dull apathy of the invalid was not to be dispelled by the most genial companionship, and Georgy's spirits had been sinking lower and lower all day as her fears increased.

She would fain have called in a strange doctor; she would fain have sought for comfort and consolation from some new quarter. But she was afraid of offending Philip Sheldon; and she was afraid of alarming her husband. So she waited, and watched, and struggled against that ever-increasing anxiety. Had not Mr. Sheldon made light of his friend's malady, and what motive could he have for deceiving her?

A breakfast-cup full of beef-tea stood on the little table by the bed-side, and had been standing there for hours untouched.

"I did take such pains to make it strong and clear," said Mrs. Woolper regretfully, as she came to the little table during a tidying process, "and poor dear Mr. Halliday hasn't taken so much as a spoonful. It won't be fit for him to-morrow, so as I haven't eaten a morsel of dinner,

what with the hurry and anxiety and one thing and another, I'll warm up the beef-tea for my supper. There's not a blessed thing in the house ; for you don't eat nothing, Mrs. Halliday ; and as to cooking a dinner for Mr. Sheldon, you'd a deal better go and throw your victuals out into the gutter, for then there'd be a chance of stray dogs profiting by 'em, at any rate."

"Phil is off his feed, then ; eh, Nancy?" said George.

"I should rather think he is, Mr. George. I roasted a chicken yesterday for him and Mrs. Halliday, and I don't think they eat an ounce between them ; and such a lovely tender young thing as it was too—done to a turn—with bread-sauce and a little bit of sea-kale. One invalid makes another, that's certain. I never saw your brother so upset as he is now, Mr. George, in all his life."

"No?" answered George Sheldon thoughtfully ; "Phil isn't generally one of your sensitive sort."

The invalid was sleeping heavily during this

conversation. George stood by the bed for some minutes looking down at the altered face, and then turned to leave the room.

"Good-night, Mrs. Halliday," he said; "I hope I shall find poor old Tom a shade better when I look round to-morrow."

"I am sure I hope so," Georgy answered mournfully.

She was sitting by the window looking out at the darkening western sky, in which the last lurid glimmer of a stormy sunset was fading against a background of iron gray.

This quiet figure by the window, the stormy sky, and ragged hurrying clouds without, the dusky chamber with all its dismally significant litter of medicine-bottles, made a gloomy picture; a picture which the man who looked upon it carried in his mind for many years after that night.

George Sheldon and Nancy Woolper left the room together, the Yorkshirewoman carrying a tray of empty phials and glasses, and amongst them the cup of beef-tea.

"He seems in a bad way to-night, Nancy,"

said George, with a backward jerk of his head towards the sick-chamber.

“He *is* in a bad way, Mr. George,” answered the woman gravely, “let Mr. Philip think what he will. I don’t want to say a word against your brother’s knowledge, for such a steady studious gentleman as he is had need be clever; and if I was ill myself, I’d trust my life to him freely; for I’ve heard Barlingford folks say that my master’s advice is as good as any regular doctor’s, and that there’s very little your regular doctors know that he doesn’t know as well or better. But for all that, Mr. George, I don’t think he understands Mr. Halliday’s case quite as clear as he might.”

“Do you think Tom’s in any danger?”

“I won’t say that, Mr. George; but I think he gets worse instead of getting better.”

“Humph!” muttered George, “if Halliday were to go off the hooks, Phil would have a good chance of getting a rich wife.”

“Don’t say that, Mr. George,” exclaimed the Yorkshirewoman reproachfully; “don’t even think

of such a thing while that poor man lies at death's door. I'm sure Mr. Sheldon hasn't any thoughts of that kind. He told me before Mr. and Mrs. Halliday came to town, that he and Miss Georgy had forgotten all about past times."

"O, if Phil said so, that alters the case. Phil is one of your blunt outspoken fellows; and always says what he means," said George Sheldon. And then he went downstairs, leaving Nancy to follow him at her leisure with the tray of jingling cups and glasses. He went down through the dusk, smiling to himself, as if he had just given utterance to some piece of intense humour. He went to look for his brother, whom he found in the torture-chamber, busied with some mysterious process in connection with a lump of plaster-of-paris, which seemed to be the model of ruined battlements in the Gothic style. The dentist looked up as George entered the room, and did not appear particularly delighted by the appearance of that gentleman.

"Well," said Mr. Sheldon the younger, "busy as usual? Patients seem to be looking up."

"Patients be — toothless to the end of time!" cried Philip, with a savage laugh. "No, I'm not working to order; I'm only experimenting."

"You're rather fond of experiments, I think, Phil," said George, seating himself near the table at which his brother was working under the glare of the gas. The dentist looked very pale and haggard in the gas-light, and his eyes had the dull sunken appearance induced by prolonged sleeplessness. George sat watching his brother thoughtfully for some time, and then produced his cigar-case. "You don't mind my smoke here?" he asked, as he lighted a cigar.

"Not at all. You are very welcome to sit here, if it amuses you to see me working at the cast of a lower jaw."

"O, that's a lower jaw, is it? It looks like the fragment of some castle-keep. No, Phil, I don't care about watching you work. I want to talk to you seriously."

"What about?"

"About that fellow upstairs; poor old Tom.

He and I were great cronies, you know, at home. He's in a very bad way, Phil."

"Is he? You seem to be turning physician all at once, George. I shouldn't have thought your grubbing among county histories, and tattered old pedigrees, and parish registers had given you so deep an insight into the science of medicine!" said the dentist, in a sneering tone.

"I don't know anything of medicine; but I know enough to be sure that Tom Halliday is about as bad as he can be. What mystifies me is, that he doesn't seem to have had anything particular the matter with him. There he lies, getting worse and worse every day, without any specific ailment. It's a strange illness, Philip."

"I don't see anything strange in it."

"Don't you? Don't you think the surrounding circumstances are strange? Here is this man comes to your house hale and hearty; and all of a sudden he falls ill, and gets lower and lower every day, without anybody being able to say why or wherefore."

“That’s not true, George. Everybody in this house knows the cause of Tom Halliday’s illness. He came home in wet clothes, and insisted on keeping them on. He caught a cold; which resulted in low fever. There is the whole history and mystery of the affair.”

“That’s simple enough, certainly. But if I were you, Phil, I’d call in another doctor.”

“That is Mrs. Halliday’s business,” answered the dentist coolly; “if she doubts my skill, she is free to call in whom she pleases. And now you may as well drop the subject, George. I’ve had enough anxiety about this man’s illness, and I don’t want to be worried by you.”

After this there was a little conversation upon general matters, but the talk dragged and languished drearily, and George Sheldon rose to depart directly he had finished his cigar.

“Good-night, Philip!” he said; “if ever you get a stroke of good luck, I hope you’ll stand something handsome to me.”

This remark had no particular relevance to anything that had been said that night by the

two men. Yet Philip Sheldon seemed in no wise astonished by it.

"If things ever *do* take a turn for the better with me, you'll find me a good friend, George," he said gravely; and then Mr. Sheldon the younger bade him good-night, and went out into Fitzgeorge-street.

He paused for a moment at the corner of the street to look back at his brother's house. He could see the lighted windows of the invalid's chamber, and it was at those he looked.

"Poor Tom," he said to himself, "poor Tom! we were great cronies in the old times, and have had many a pleasant evening together!"

Mr. Sheldon the dentist sat up till the small hours that night, as he had done for many nights lately. He finished his work in the torture-chamber, and went up to the common sitting-room, or drawing-room as it was called by courtesy, a little before midnight. The servants had gone to bed, for there was no regular nightly watch in the apartment of the invalid. Mrs. Halliday lay on

a sofa in her husband's room, and Nancy Woolper slept in an adjoining apartment, always wakeful and ready if help of any kind should be wanted.

The house was very quiet just now. Philip Sheldon walked up and down the room, thinking ; and the creaking of his boots sounded unpleasantly loud to his ears. He stopped before the fire-place, after having walked to and fro some time, and began to examine some letters that lay upon the mantelpiece. They were addressed to Mr. Halliday, and had been forwarded from Yorkshire. The dentist took them up one by one, and deliberately examined them. They were all business letters, and most of them bore country post-marks. But there was one which had been, in the first instance, posted from London ; and this letter Mr. Sheldon examined with especial attention.

It was a big official-looking document, and embossed upon the adhesive envelope appeared the crest and motto of the Alliance Insurance Office.

“ I wonder whether that's all square,” thought

Mr. Sheldon, as he turned the envelope about in his hands, staring at it absently. "I ought to make sure of that. The London post-mark is nearly three weeks old." He pondered for some moments, and then went to the cupboard in which he kept the materials wherewith to replenish or to make a fire. Here he found a little tin tea-kettle, in which he was in the habit of boiling water for occasional friendly glasses of grog. He poured some water from a bottle on the sideboard into this kettle, set fire to a bundle of wood, and put the kettle on the blazing sticks. After having done this he searched for a tea-cup, succeeded in finding one, and then stood watching for the boiling of the water. He had not long to wait; the water boiled furiously before the wood was burnt out, and Mr. Sheldon filled the tea-cup standing on the table. Then he put the insurance-office letter over the cup, with the seal downwards, and left it so while he resumed his walk. After walking up and down for about ten minutes he went back to the table and took up the letter. The adhesive envelope opened easily, and Mr.

Sheldon, by this ingenious stratagem, made himself master of his friend's business.

The "Alliance" letter was nothing more than a notice to the effect that the half-yearly premium for insuring the sum of three thousand pounds on the life of Thomas Halliday would be due on such a day, after which there would be twenty-one days' grace, at the end of which time the policy would become void, unless the premium had been duly paid.

Mr. Halliday's letters had been suffered to accumulate during the last fortnight. The letters forwarded from Yorkshire had been detained some time, as they had been sent first to Hyley Farm, now in possession of the new owner, and then to Barlingford, to the house of Georgy's mother, who had kept them upwards of a week, in daily expectation of her son-in-law's return. It was only on the receipt of a letter from Georgy, containing the tidings of her husband's illness, that Mr. Halliday's letters had been sent to London.

Thus it came about that the twenty-one days of grace were within four-and-twenty hours of

expiring when Philip Sheldon opened his friend's letter.

"This is serious," muttered the dentist, as he stood deliberating with the open letter in his hand; "there are three thousand pounds depending on that man's power to write a cheque!"

After a few minutes' reflection, he folded the letter and resealed it very carefully.

"It wouldn't do to press the matter upon him to-night," he thought; "I must wait till to-morrow morning, come what may."

CHAPTER VI.

MR. BURKHAM'S UNCERTAINTIES.

THE next morning dawned gray and pale and chill, after the manner of early spring mornings, let them ripen into never such balmy days; and with the dawn Nancy Woolper came into the invalid's chamber, more wan and sickly of aspect than the morning itself.

Mrs. Halliday started from an uneasy slumber.

“What’s the matter, Nancy?” she asked with considerable alarm. She had known the woman ever since her childhood, and she was startled this morning by some indefinable change in her manner and appearance. The hearty old woman, whose face had been like a hard rosy apple shrivelled and wrinkled by long keeping, had now a white and ghastly look which struck terror to Georgy’s breast. She who was usually so brisk

of manner and sharp of speech, had this morning a strange subdued tone and an unnatural calmness of demeanour. "What is the matter, Nancy?" Mrs. Halliday repeated, getting up from her sofa.

"Don't be frightened, Miss Georgy," answered the old woman, who was apt to forget that Tom Halliday's wife had ever ceased to be Georgy Cradock; "don't be frightened, my dear. I haven't been very well all night,—and—and—I've been worrying myself about Mr. Halliday. If I were you, I'd call in another doctor. Never mind what Mr. Philip says. He may be mistaken, you know, clever as he is. There's no telling. Take my advice, Miss Georgy, and call in another doctor—directly—directly," repeated the old woman, seizing Mrs. Halliday's wrist with a passionate energy, as if to give emphasis to her words.

Poor timid Georgy shrank from her with terror.

"You frighten me, Nancy," she whispered; "do you think that Tom is so much worse? You have not been with him all night; and he has

been sleeping very quietly. What makes you so anxious this morning?"

"Never mind that, Miss Georgy. You get another doctor, that's all; get another doctor at once. Mr. Sheldon is a light sleeper. I'll go to his room and tell him you've set your heart upon having fresh advice; if you'll only bear me out afterwards."

"Yes, yes; go, by all means," exclaimed Mrs. Halliday, only too ready to take alarm under the influence of a stronger mind, and eager to act when supported by another person.

Nancy Woolper went to her master's room. He must have been sleeping very lightly, if he was sleeping at all; for he was broad awake the next minute after his housekeeper's light knock had sounded on the door. In less than five minutes he came out of his room half-dressed. Nancy told him that Mrs. Halliday had taken fresh alarm about her husband, and wished for further advice.

"She sent you to tell me that?" asked Philip.

"Yes."

“And when does she want this new doctor called in?”

“Immediately, if possible.”

It was seven o'clock by this time, and the morning was brightening a little.

“Very well,” said Mr. Sheldon; “her wishes shall be attended to directly. Heaven forbid that I should stand between my old friend and any chance of his speedy recovery! If a stranger can bring him round quicker than I can, let the stranger come.”

Mr. Sheldon was not slow to obey Mrs. Halliday's behest. He was departing on his quest breakfastless, when Nancy Woolper met him in the hall with a cup of tea. He accepted the cup almost mechanically from her hand, and took it into the parlour, whither Nancy followed him. Then for the first time he perceived that change in his housekeeper's face which had so startled Georgina Halliday. The change was somewhat modified now; but still the Nancy Woolper of to-day was not the Nancy Woolper of yesterday.

“You’re looking very queer, Nancy,” said the dentist, gravely scrutinising the woman’s face with his bright penetrating eyes. “Are you ill?”

“Well, Mr. Philip, I have been rather queer all night,—sickish and faintish-like.”

“Ah, you’ve been over-fatiguing yourself in the sick-room, I daresay. Take care you don’t knock yourself up.”

“No; it’s not that, Mr. Philip. There’s not many can stand hard work better than I can. It’s not *that* as made me ill. I took something last night that disagreed with me.”

“More fool you,” said Mr. Sheldon curtly; “you ought to know better than to ill-use your digestive powers at your age. What was it? Hard cold meat and preternaturally green pickles, I suppose; or something of that kind.”

“No, sir; it was only a drop of beef-tea that I made for poor Mr. Halliday. And that oughtn’t to have disagreed with a baby, you know, sir.”

“Oughtn’t it?” cried the dentist disdainfully. “That’s a little bit of vulgar ignorance, Mrs.

Woolper. I suppose it was stuff that had been taken up to Mr. Halliday."

"Yes, Mr. Philip; you took it up with your own hands."

"Ah, to be sure; so I did. Very well, then, Mrs. Woolper, if you knew as much about atmospheric influences as I do, you'd know that food which has been standing for hours in the pestilential air of a fever-patient's room isn't fit for anybody to eat. The stuff made you sick, I suppose."

"Yes, sir; sick to my very heart," answered the Yorkshirewoman, with a strange mournfulness in her voice.

"Let that be a warning to you, then. Don't take anything more that comes down from the sick-room."

"I don't think there'll be any chance of my doing that long, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't fancy Mr. Halliday is long for this world."

"Ah, you women are always ravens."

“Unless the strange doctor can do something to cure him. O, pray bring a clever man who will be able to cure that poor helpless creature upstairs. Think, Mr. Philip, how you and him used to be friends and playfellows,—brothers almost,—when you was both bits of boys. Think how bad it might seem to evil-minded folks if he died under your roof.”

The dentist had been standing near the door drinking his tea during this conversation; and now for the first time he looked at his house-keeper with an expression of unmitigated astonishment.

“What, in the name of all that’s ridiculous, do you mean, Nancy?” he asked impatiently. “What has my roof to do with Tom Halliday’s illness—or his death, if it came to that? And what on earth can people have to say about it if he should die here instead of anywhere else?”

“Why, you see, sir, you being his friend, and Miss Georgy’s sweetheart that was, and him having no other doctor, folks might take it into their heads he wasn’t attended properly.”

“Because I’m his friend? That’s very good logic! I’ll tell you what it is, Mrs. Woolper; if any woman upon earth, except the woman who nursed me when I was a baby, had presumed to talk to me as you have been talking to me just this minute, I should open the door yonder and tell her to walk out of my house. Let that serve as a hint for you, Nancy; and don’t you go out of your way a second time to advise me how I should treat my friend and my patient.”

He handed her the empty cup, and walked out of the house. There had been no passion in his tone. His accent had been only that of a man who has occasion to reprove an old and trusted servant for an unwarrantable impertinence. Nancy Woolper stood at the street-door watching him as he walked away, and then went slowly back to her duties in the lower regions of the house.

“It can’t be true,” she muttered to herself; “it can’t be true.”

The dentist returned to Fitzgeorge-street in

less than an hour, bringing with him a surgeon from the neighbourhood, who saw the patient, discussed the treatment, spoke hopefully to Mrs. Halliday, and departed, after promising to send a saline draught. Poor Georgy's spirits, which had revived a little under the influence of the stranger's hopeful words, sank again when she discovered that the utmost the new doctor could do was to order a saline draught. Her husband had taken so many saline draughts, and had been getting daily worse under their influence.

She watched the stranger wistfully as he lingered on the threshold to say a few words to Mr. Sheldon. He was a very young man, with a frank boyish face and a rosy colour in his cheeks. He looked like some fresh young neophyte in the awful mysteries of medical science, and by no means the sort of man to whom one would have imagined Philip Sheldon appealing for help, when he found his own skill at fault. But then it must be remembered that Mr. Sheldon had only summoned the stranger in compliance with what he considered a womanish whim.

“He looks very young,” Georgina said regretfully, after the doctor’s departure.

“So much the better, my dear Mrs. Halliday,” answered the dentist cheerfully; “medical science is eminently progressive, and the youngest men are the best-educated men.”

Poor Georgy did not understand this; but it sounded convincing; and she was in the habit of believing what people told her; so she accepted Mr. Sheldon’s opinion. How could she doubt that he was wiser than herself in all matters connected with the medical profession?

“Tom seems a little better this morning,” she said presently.

The invalid was asleep, shrouded by the curtain of the heavy old-fashioned four-post bedstead.

“He is better,” answered the dentist; “so much better, that I shall venture to give him a few business letters that have been waiting for him some time, as soon as he wakes.”

He seated himself by the head of the bed, and waited quietly for the awakening of the patient.

“Your breakfast is ready for you downstairs,

Mrs. Halliday," he said presently; "hadn't you better go down and take it, while I keep watch here? It's nearly ten o'clock."

"I don't care about any breakfast," Georgina answered piteously.

"Ah, but you'd better eat something. You'll make yourself an invalid, if you are not careful; and then you won't be able to attend upon Tom."

This argument prevailed immediately. Georgy went downstairs to the drawing-room, and tried bravely to eat and drink, in order that she might be sustained in her attendance upon her husband. She had forgotten all the throes and tortures of jealousy which she had endured on his account. She had forgotten his late hours and unholy roisterings. She had forgotten everything except that he had been very tender and kind throughout the prosperous years of their married life, and that he was lying in the darkened room upstairs sick to death.

Mr. Sheldon waited with all outward show of patience for the awakening of the invalid. But

he looked at his watch twice during that half-hour of waiting: and once he rose and moved softly about the room, searching for writing materials. He found a little portfolio of Georgina's, and a frivolous-minded ink-stand, after the semblance of an apple, with a gilt stalk and leaflet. The dentist took the trouble to ascertain that there was a decent supply of ink in the green glass apple, and that the pens were in working order. Then he went quietly back to his seat by the bedside and waited.

The invalid opened his eyes presently, and recognised his friend with a feeble smile.

“Well, Tom, old fellow, how do you feel to-day?—a little better, I hear from Mrs. H.,” said the dentist cheerily.

“Yes, I think I *am* a shade better. But, you see, the deuce of it is I never get more than a shade better. It always stops at that. The little woman can't complain of me now, can she, Sheldon? No more late hours, or oyster-suppers, eh?”

“No, no, not just yet. You'll have to take

care of yourself for a week or two when you get about again."

Mr. Halliday smiled faintly as his friend said this.

"I shall be very careful of myself if I ever do get about again, you may depend upon it, old fellow. But do you know I sometimes fancy I have spent my last jolly evening, and eaten my last oyster-supper, on this earth? I'm afraid it's time for me to begin to think seriously of a good many things. The little woman is all right, thank God. I made my will upwards of a year ago, and insured my life pretty heavily soon after my marriage. Old Cradock never let me rest till that was done. So Georgy will be all safe. But when a man has led a careless, godless kind of a life,—doing very little harm perhaps, but doing no particular good,—he ought to set about making up his account somehow for a better world, when he feels himself slipping out of this. I asked Georgy for her Bible yesterday, and the poor dear loving little thing was frightened out of her wits. 'O, don't talk like that, Tom,' she cried; 'Mr. Shel-

don says you are getting better every hour,'—by which you may guess what a rare thing it is for me to read my Bible. No, Phil, old fellow, you've done your best for me, I know; but I'm not made of a very tough material, and all the physic you can pour down this poor sore throat of mine won't put any strength into me."

"Nonsense, dear boy; that's just what a man who has not been accustomed to illness is sure to think directly he is laid up for a day or two."

"I've been laid up for three weeks," murmured Mr. Halliday rather fretfully.

"Well, well, perhaps this Mr. Burkham will bring you round in three days, and then you'll say that your friend Sheldon was an ignoramus."

"No, no, I sha'n't, old fellow; I'm not such a fool as that. I'm not going to blame you when it's my own constitution that's in fault. As to that young man you brought here just now, to please Georgy, I don't suppose he'll be able to do any more for me than you have done."

"We'll contrive to bring you round between us, never fear, Tom," answered Philip Sheldon

in his most hopeful tone. "Why, you are looking almost your old self this morning. You are so much improved that I may venture to talk to you about business. There have been some letters lying about for the last few days. I didn't like to bore you while you were so very low. But they look like business letters; and perhaps it would be as well for you to open them."

The sick man contemplated the little packet which the dentist had taken from his breast-pocket; and then shook his head wearily.

"I'm not up to the mark, Sheldon," he said; "the letters must keep."

"O, come, come, old fellow! That's giving way, you know. The letters may be important; and it will do you good if you make an effort to rouse yourself."

"I tell you it isn't in me to do it, Philip Sheldon. I'm past making efforts. Can't you see that, man? Open the letters yourself if you like."

"No, no, Halliday, I won't do that. Here's one with the seal of the Alliance Insurance Office. I suppose your premium is all right."

Tom Halliday lifted himself on his elbow for a moment, startled into new life : but he sank back on the pillows again immediately, with a feeble groan.

"I don't know about that," he said anxiously; "you'd better look to that, Phil, for the little woman's sake. A man is apt to think that his insurance is settled and done with when he has been pommelled about by the doctors and approved by the board. He forgets there's that little matter of the premium. You'd better open the letter, Phil. I never was a good hand at remembering dates, and this illness has thrown me altogether out of gear."

Mr. Sheldon tore open that official document which, in his benevolent regard for his friend's interest, he had manipulated so cleverly on the previous evening, and read the letter with all show of deliberation.

"You're right, Tom," he exclaimed presently. "The twenty-one days' grace expire to-day. You'd better write me a check at once, and I'll send it on to the office by hand. Where's your check-book?"

“In the pocket of that coat hanging up there.”

Philip Sheldon found the check-book, and brought it to his friend, with Georgy's portfolio, and the frivolous little green glass inkstand in the shape of an apple. He adjusted the writing materials for the sick man's use with womanly gentleness. His arm supported the wasted frame, as Tom Halliday slowly and laboriously filled in the check; and when the signature was duly appended to that document he drew a long breath, which seemed to express infinite relief of mind.

“You'll be sure it goes on to the Alliance Office, eh, old fellow?” asked Tom, as he tore out the oblong slip of paper and handed it to his friend. “It was kind of you to jog my memory about this business. I'm such a fellow for procrastinating matters. And I'm afraid I've been a little off my head during the last week.”

“Nonsense, Tom; not you.”

“O yes, I have. I've had all sorts of queer fancies. Did you come into this room the night before last, when Georgy was asleep?”

Mr. Sheldon reflected for a moment before answering.

"No," he said, "not the night before last."

"Ah, I thought as much," murmured the invalid. "I was off my head that night then, Phil, for I fancied I saw you; and I fancied I heard the bottles and glasses jingling on the little table behind the curtain."

"You were dreaming, perhaps."

"O no, I wasn't dreaming. I was very restless and wakeful that night. However, that's neither here nor there. I lie in a stupid state sometimes for hours and hours, and I feel as weak as a rat, bodily and mentally; so while I have my wits about me I'd better say what I've been wanting to say ever so long. You've been a good and kind friend to me all through this illness, Phil, and I'm not ungrateful for your kindness. If it does come to the worst with me—as I believe it will—Georgy shall give you a handsome mourning ring, or fifty pounds to buy one, if you like it better. And now let me shake hands with you,

Philip Sheldon, and say thank you heartily, old fellow, for once and for ever."

The invalid stretched out a poor feeble attenuated hand, and, after a moment's pause, Philip Sheldon clasped it in his own muscular fingers. He did hesitate for just one instant before taking that hand.

He was no student of the gospel; but when he had left the sick chamber there arose before him suddenly, as if written in letters of fire on the wall opposite to him, one sentence which had been familiar to him in his school-days at Barlingford:

And as soon as he was come, he goeth straightway to him, and saith, Master, master; and kissed him.

The new doctor came twice a day to see his patient. He seemed rather anxious about the case, and just a little puzzled by the symptoms. Georgy had sufficient penetration to perceive that this new adviser was in some manner at fault; and she began to think that Philip Sheldon

was right, and that regular practitioners were very stupid creatures. She communicated her doubts to Mr. Sheldon, and suggested the expediency of calling in some grave elderly doctor, to supersede Mr. Burkham. But against this the dentist protested very strongly.

“You asked me to call in a stranger, Mrs. Halliday, and I have done so,” he said with the dignity of an offended man. “You must now abide by his treatment, and content yourself with his advice, unless he chooses to summon further assistance.”

Georgy was fain to submit. She gave a little plaintive sigh, and went back to her husband's room, where she sat and wept silently behind the bed-curtains. There was a double watch kept in the sick chamber now; for Nancy Woolper rarely left it, and rarely closed her eyes. It was altogether a sad time in the dentist's house; and Tom Halliday apologised to his friend more than once for the trouble he had brought upon him. If he had been familiar with the details of modern history, he would have quoted

Charles Stuart, and begged pardon for being so long a-dying.

But anon there came a gleam of hope. The patient seemed decidedly better; and Georgy was prepared to revere Mr. Burkham, the Bloomsbury surgeon, as the greatest and ablest of men. Those shadows of doubt and perplexity which had at first obscured Mr. Burkham's brow cleared away, and he spoke very cheerfully of the invalid.

Unhappily this state of things did not last long. The young surgeon came one morning, and was obviously alarmed by the appearance of his patient. He told Philip Sheldon as much; but that gentleman made very light of his fears. As the two men discussed the case, it was very evident that the irregular practitioner was quite a match for the regular one. Mr. Burkham listened deferentially, but departed only half convinced. He walked briskly away from the house, but came to a dead stop directly after turning out of Fitzgeorge-street.

"What ought I to do?" he asked himself.

“What course ought I to take? If I am right, I should be a villain to let things go on. If I am wrong, anything like interference would ruin me for life.”

He had finished his morning round, but he did not go straight home. He lingered at the corners of quiet streets, and walked up and down the unfrequented side of a gloomy square. Once he turned and retraced his steps in the direction of Fitzgeorge-street. But after all this hesitation he walked home, and ate his dinner very thoughtfully, answering his young wife at random when she talked to him. He was a struggling man, who had invested his small fortune in the purchase of a practice which had turned out a very poor one, and he had the battle of life before him.

“There’s something on your mind to-day, I’m sure, Harry,” his wife said before the meal was ended.

“Well, yes, dear,” he answered; “I’ve rather a difficult case in Fitzgeorge-street, and I’m anxious about it.”

The industrious little wife disappeared after dinner, and the young surgeon walked up and down the room alone, brooding over that difficult case in Fitzgeorge-street. After spending nearly an hour thus, he snatched his hat suddenly from the table on which he had set it down, and hurried from the house.

“I’ll have advice and assistance, come what may,” he said to himself, as he walked rapidly in the direction of Mr. Sheldon’s house. “The case may be straight enough—I certainly can’t see that the man has any motive—but I’ll have advice.”

He looked up at the dentist’s spotless dwelling as he crossed the street. The blinds were all down, and the fact that they were so sent a sudden chill to his heart. But the April sunshine was full upon that side of the street, and there might be no significance in those closely-drawn blinds. The door was opened by a sleepy-looking boy, and in the passage Mr. Burkham met Philip Sheldon.

“I have been rather anxious about my patient

since this morning, Mr. Sheldon," said the surgeon; "and I've come to the conclusion that I ought to confer with a man of higher standing than myself. Do you think Mrs. Halliday will object to such a course?"

"I am sure she would not have objected to it," the dentist answered very gravely, "if you had suggested it sooner. I am sorry to say the suggestion comes too late. My poor friend breathed his last half an hour ago."

Book the Second.

THE TWO MACAIRES.

CHAPTER I.

A GOLDEN TEMPLE.

IN the very midst of the Belgian iron country, under the shadow of tall sheltering ridges of pine-clad mountain-land, nestles the fashionable little watering-place called Forêt-de-chêne. Two or three handsome hotels; a bright white new pile of building, with vast windows of shining plate-glass, and a stately quadrangular courtyard; a tiny street, which looks as if a fragment of English Brighton had been dropped into this Belgian valley; a stunted semi-classic temple, which is at once a post-office and a shrine whereat invalids perform their worship of Hygeia by the consumption of unspeakably disagreeable mineral-waters; a few tall white villas scattered here and there upon the slopes of pine-clad hills; and a very uncomfortable railway station—constitute

the chief features of Forêtdechêne. But right and left of that little cluster of shops and hotels there stretch deep sombre avenues of oak, that look like sheltered ways to Paradise—and the deep, deep blue of the August sky, and the pure breath of the warm soft air, and the tender green of the young pine-woods that clothe the sandy hills, and the delicious tranquillity that pervades the sleepy little town and bathes the hot landscape in a languorous mist, are charms that render Forêtdechêne a pleasant oasis amid the lurid woods and mountains of the iron country.

Only at stated intervals the quiet of this sleepy hollow is broken by the rolling of wheels, the jingling of bells, the cracking of whips, the ejaculations of drivers, and supplications of touters: only when the railroad carries away departing visitors, or brings fresh ones, is there anything like riot or confusion in the little town under the pine-clad hills—and even then the riot and confusion are of a very mild order, and create but a transient discord amongst the harmonies of nature.

And yet, despite the Arcadian tranquillity of the landscape, the drowsy quiet of the pine-groves, the deep and solemn shade of those dark avenues, where one might fondly hope to find some Druidess lingering beneath the shelter of the oaks, there is excitement of no common order to be found in the miniature watering-place of Forêtdechêne ; and the reflective and observant traveller, on a modern sentimental journey, has only to enter the stately white building with the glittering plate-glass windows in order to behold the master-passions of the human breast unveiled for his pleasure and edification.

The ignorant traveller, impelled by curiosity, finds no bar to his entrance. The doors are as wide open as if the mansion were an hotel ; and yet it is not an hotel, though a placard which he passes informs the traveller that he may have ices and *sorbets*, if he will ; nor is the bright fresh-looking building a theatre, for another placard informs the visitor that there are dramatic performances to be witnessed every evening in a building on one side of the quadrangle, which

is a mere subsidiary attachment to the vast white mansion. The traveller, passing on his way unhindered, save by a man in livery, who deprives him of his cane, ascends a splendid staircase and traverses a handsome antechamber, from which a pair of plate-glass doors open into a spacious saloon, where, in the warm August sunlight, a circle of men and women are gathered round a great green table, gambling.

The ignorant traveller, unaccustomed to the amusements of a Continental watering-place, may perhaps feel a little sense of surprise—a something almost akin to shame—as he contemplates that silent crowd: whose occupation seems so much the more strange to him because of their silence. There is no lively bustle, none of that animation which generally attends every kind of amusement, none of the clamour of the betting-ring or the exchange. The gamblers at Forêt-de-chêne are terribly in earnest: and the ignorant visitor unconsciously adapts himself to the solemn hush of the place and steps softly as he approaches the table round which they are clustered—as many

sitting as can find room round the green-cloth-covered board ; while behind the sitters there are people standing two or three rows deep, the hindmost watching the table over the shoulders of their neighbours. A placard upon the wall informs visitors that only constant players are permitted to remain seated at that sacred table. Perhaps a third of the players and a third of the lookers-on are women. And if there are lips more tightly contracted than other lips, and eyes with a harder, greedier light in them than other eyes, those lips and those eyes belong to the women. The ungloved feminine hands have a claw-like aspect as they scrape the glittering pieces of silver over the green cloth ; the feminine throats look weird and scraggy as they crane themselves over masculine shoulders ; the feminine eyes have something demoniac in their steely glare as they keep watch upon the rapid progress of the game.

Half-a-dozen moderate fortunes seem to be lost and won while the traveller looks on from the background, unnoticed and unseen ; for if

those plate-glass doors swung suddenly open to admit the seven angels of the Apocalypse, carrying the seven golden vials filled with the wrath of God, it is doubtful whether the splendour of their awful glory, or the trumpet-notes that heralded their coming, would have power to arouse the players from their profound abstraction.

Half-a-dozen comfortable little patrimonies seem to have changed hands while the traveller has been looking on ; and yet he has only watched the table for about ten minutes ; and this splendid *salon* is but an outer chamber, where one may stake as shabby a sum as two francs, if one is shabby enough to wish to do so, and where playing for half-an-hour or so on a pleasant summer morning one could scarcely lose more than fifty or sixty pounds. Another pair of plate-glass doors open into an inner chamber, where the silence is still more profound, and where around a larger table sit one row of players ; while only here and there a little group of outsiders stand behind their chairs. There is more gilding on

the walls and ceiling of this chamber; the frescoes are more delicate; the crystal chandeliers are adorned with richer clusters of sparkling drops, that twinkle like diamonds in the sun. This is the temple of gold; and in this splendid chamber one may hazard no smaller stake than half a napoleon. There are women here; but not so many women as in the outer saloon; and the women here are younger and prettier and more carefully dressed than those who stake only silver.

The prettiest and the youngest woman in this golden chamber on one particular August afternoon, nine years after the death of Tom Halliday, was a girl who stood behind the chair of a military-looking Englishman, an old man whose handsome face was a little disfigured by those traces which late hours and dissipated habits are supposed to leave behind them.

The girl held a card in one hand and a pin in the other, and was occupied in some mysterious process, by which she kept note of the Englishman's play. She was very young, with a delicate

face, in whose softer lines there was a refined likeness to the features of the man whose play she watched. But while his eyes were hard and cold and gray, hers were of that dense black in which there seems such an unfathomable and mysterious depth. As she was the handsomest, so she was also the worst-dressed woman in the room. Her flimsy silk mantle had faded from black to rusty brown; the straw-hat which shaded her face was sun-burnt; the ribbons had lost their brightness; but there was an air of attempted fashion in the puffings and trimmings of her alpaca skirt; and there was evidence of a struggle with poverty in the tight-fitting lavender gloves, whose streaky lines bore witness to the imperfection of the cleaner's art. Elegant Parisians and the select of Brussels glanced at the military Englishman and his handsome daughter with some slight touch of supercilious surprise—one has no right to find shabbily-dressed young women in the golden temple—and it is scarcely necessary to state that it was from her own countrywomen the young person in alpaca received the most chilling glances. But

those Parthian arrows shot from feminine eyes had little power to wound their object just now. The girl looked up from her perforated card very seldom ; and when she raised her eyes, it was always to look in one direction—towards the great glass-doors opening from the outer saloon. Loungers came and went ; the doors swung open and closed again as noiselessly as it is possible for well-regulated doors to open and shut ; footsteps sounded on the polished floors ; and sometimes when the young person in alpaca lifted her eyes, a passing shadow of disappointment darkened her face. A modern Laurence Sterne, on a new Sentimental Journey, might have derived some interest from the study of the girl's countenance ; but the reflective and observant traveller is not to be encountered very often in this age of excursionists ; and Maria and her goat may roam the highways and byways for a long time before she will find any dreamy loiterer with a mind attuned to sympathy.

The shabbily-dressed girl was looking for someone. She watched her father's play carefully—

she marked her card with unfailing precision ; but she performed these duties with a mechanical air ; and it was only when she lifted her eyes to the great shining plate-glass doors which opened into this dangerous Paradise, that any ray of feeling animated her countenance. She was looking for someone, and the person watched for was so long coming. Ah, how difficult for the arithmetician to number the crushing disappointments, the bitter agonies that one woman can endure in a single half-hour ! This girl was so young—so young ; and already she had learnt to suffer.

The man played with the concentrated attention and the impassible countenance of an experienced gamester, rarely lifting his eyes from the green cloth, never looking back at the girl who stood behind him. He was winning to-day, and he accepted his good fortune as quietly as he had often accepted evil fortune at the same table. He seemed to be playing on some system of his own ; and neighbouring players looked at him with envious eyes, as they saw the pile of gold grow larger under his thin nervous hands. Ignorant

gamesters, who stood aloof after having lost two or three napoleons, contemplated the lucky Englishman and wondered about him, while some touch of pity leavened the envy excited by his wonderful fortune. He looked like a decayed gentleman—a man who had been a military dandy in the days that were gone, and who had all the old pretensions still, without the power to support them—a Brummel languishing at Caen; a Nash wasting slowly at Bath.

At last the girl's face brightened suddenly as she glanced upwards; and it would have been very easy for the observant traveller—if any such person had existed—to construe aright that bright change in her countenance. The someone she had been watching for had arrived.

The doors swung open to admit a man of about five-and-twenty, whose darkly-handsome face and careless costume had something of that air which was once wont to be associated with the person and the poetry of George Gordon Lord Byron. The new-comer was just one of those men whom very young women are apt to admire, and whom

worldly-minded people are prone to distrust. There was a perfume of Bohemianism, a flavour of the Quartier Latin, about the loosely-tied cravat, the wide trousers, and black-velvet morning-coat, with which the young man outraged the opinions of respectable visitors at Forêtdechêne. There was a semi-poetic vagabondism in the half-indifferent, half-contemptuous expression of his face, with its fierce moustache, and strongly-marked eyebrows overshadowing sleepy gray eyes—eyes that were half hidden by their long dark lashes; as still pools of blue water lie sometimes hidden among the rushes that flourish round them.

He was handsome, and he knew that he was handsome; but he affected to despise the beauty of his proud dark face, as he affected to despise all the brightest and most beautiful things upon earth; and yet there was a vagabondish kind of foppery in his costume that contrasted sharply with the gentlemanly dandyism of the shabby gamester sitting at the table. There was a distance of nearly half a century between the style of the Regency dandy and the Quartier-Latin lion.

The girl watched the new-comer with sad earnest eyes as he walked slowly towards the table, and a faint blush kindled in her cheeks as he came nearer to the spot where she stood. He went by her presently, carrying an atmosphere of stale tobacco with him as he went; and he gave her a friendly nod as he passed, and a "Good-morning, Diana;" but that was all. The faint blush faded and left her very pale: but she resumed her weary task with the card and the pin; and if she had endured any disappointment within those few moments, it seemed to be a kind of disappointment that she was accustomed to suffer.

The young man walked round the table till he came to the only vacant chair, in which he seated himself, and after watching the game for a few minutes, began to play. From the moment in which he dropped into that vacant seat to the moment in which he rose to leave the table, three hours afterwards, he never lifted his eyes from the green cloth, or seemed to be conscious of anything that was going on around or

about him. The girl watched him furtively for some little time after he had taken his place at the table ; but the stony mask of the professed gambler is a profitless object for a woman's earnest scrutiny.

She sighed presently, and laid her hand heavily on the chair behind which she was standing. The action aroused the man who sat in it, and he turned and looked at her for the first time.

“You are tired, Diana?”

“Yes, papa, I am very tired.”

“Give me your card, then, and go away,” the gamester answered peevishly ; “girls are always tired.”

She gave him the mysteriously - perforated card, and left her post behind his chair ; and then, after roaming about the great saloon with a weary listless air, and wandering from one open window to another to look into the sunny quadrangle, where well-dressed people were sitting at little tables eating ices or drinking lemonade, she went away altogether, and roamed into another chamber where some children were

dancing to the sound of a feeble violin. She sat upon a velvet-covered bench, and watched the children's lesson for some minutes, and then rose and wandered to another open window that overlooked the same quadrangle, where the well-dressed people were enjoying themselves in the hot August sunshine.

“How extravagantly everybody dresses!” she thought, “and what a shabby poverty-stricken creature one feels amongst them! And yet if I ask papa to give me a couple of napoleons out of the money he won to-day, he will only look at me from head to foot, and tell me that I have a gown and a cloak and a bonnet, and ask me what more I can want, in the name of all that is unreasonable? And I see girls here whose fathers are so fond of them and so proud of them—ugly girls, decked out in silks and muslins and ribbons that have cost a small fortune—clumsy awkward girls, who look at *me* as if I were some new kind of wild animal.”

The saloons at Forêtdechêne were rich in monster sheets of looking-glass; and in wan-

dering discontentedly about the room Diana Paget saw herself reflected many times in all her shabbiness. It was only very lately she had discovered that she had some pretension to good looks; for her father, who could not or would not educate her decently or clothe her creditably, took a very high tone of morality in his paternal teaching, and, in the fear that she might one day grow vain of her beauty, had taken care to impress upon her at an early age that she was the very incarnation of all that is lean and sallow and awkward.

CHAPTER II.

THE EASY DESCENT.

AMONGST the many imprudences of which Horatio Paget—once a cornet in a crack cavalry regiment, always a captain in his intercourse with the world—had been guilty during the course of a long career, there was none for which he so bitterly reproached himself as for a certain foolish marriage which he had made late in life. It was when he had thrown away the last chance that an indulgent destiny had given him, that the ruined fop of the Regency, the sometime member of the Beefsteak Club, the man who in his earliest youth had worn a silver gridiron at his button-hole, and played piquet in the gilded saloons of Georgina of Devonshire, found himself laid on a bed of sickness in dingy London lodgings, and nearer death than he had ever been in the course of his brief military

career ; so nearly gliding from life's swift-flowing river into eternity's trackless ocean, that the warmest thrill of gratitude which ever stirred the slow pulses of his cold heart quickened its beating as he clasped the hand that had held him back from the unknown region whose icy breath had chilled him with an awful fear. Such men as Horatio Paget are apt to feel a strange terror when the black night drops suddenly down upon them, and the "Gray Boatman's" voice sounds hollow and mysterious in the darkness, announcing that the ocean is near. The hand that held the ruined spendthrift back when the current swept so swiftly ocean-ward was a woman's tender hand ; and Heaven only knows what patient watchfulness, what careful administration of medicines and unwearying preparation of broths and jellies and sagoes and gruels, what untiring and devoted slavery, had been necessary to save the faded rake ; who looked out upon the world once more, a ghastly shadow of his former self, a penniless helpless burden for anyone who might choose to support him.

“Don’t thank *me*,” said the doctor, when his feeble patient whimpered flourishing protestations of his gratitude, unabashed by the consciousness that such grateful protestations were the sole coin with which the medical man would be paid for his services; “thank that young woman, if you want to thank anybody; for if it had not been for her you wouldn’t be here to talk about gratitude. And if ever you get such another attack of inflammation on the lungs, you had better pray for such another nurse, though I don’t think you’re likely to find one.”

And with this exordium, the rough-and-ready surgeon took his departure, leaving Horatio Paget alone with the woman who had saved his life.

She was only his landlady’s daughter; and his landlady was no prosperous householder in Mayfair, thriving on the extravagance of wealthy bachelors, but an honest widow, living in an obscure little street leading out of the Old Kent-road, and letting a meagrely-furnished little parlour and a still more meagrely-furnished little bedroom to any single gentleman whom reverse

of fortune might lead into such a locality. Captain Paget had sunk very low in the world when he took possession of that wretched parlour and laid himself down to rest on the widow's flock-bed.

There is apt to be a dreary interval in the life of such a man—a blank dismal interregnum, which divides the day in which he spends his last shilling from the hour in which he begins to prey deliberately upon the purses of other people. It was in that hopeless interval that Horatio Paget established himself in the widow's parlour. But though he slept in the Old Kent-road, he had not yet brought himself to endure existence on the Surrey side of the water. He emerged from his lodging every morning to hasten westward, resplendent in clean linen and exquisitely-fitting gloves, an unquestionable overcoat, and varnished boots.

The wardrobe has its Indian summer; and the glory of a first-rate tailor's coat is like the splendour of a tropical sun—it is glorious to the last, and sinks in a moment. Captain Paget's

wardrobe was in its Indian summer in these days; and when he felt how fatally near the Bond-street pavement was to the soles of his feet, he could not refrain from a fond admiration of the boots that were so beautiful in decay.

He walked the West-end for many weary hours every day during this period of his decadence. He tried to live in an honest gentlemanly way, by borrowing money of his friends, or discounting an accommodation-bill obtained from some innocent acquaintance who was deluded by his brilliant appearance and specious tongue into a belief in the transient nature of his difficulties. He spent his days in hanging about the halls and waiting-rooms of clubs—of some of which he had once been a member; he walked weary miles between St. James's and Mayfair, Kensington Gore and Notting Hill, leaving little notes for men who were not at home, or writing a little note in one room while the man to whom he was writing hushed his breath in an adjoining chamber. People who had once been Captain Paget's fast friends seemed to have simultane-

ously decided upon spending their existence out of doors, as it appeared to the impecunious Captain. The servants of his friends were afflicted with a strange uncertainty as to their masters' movements. At whatever hall-door Horatio Paget presented himself, it seemed equally doubtful whether the proprietor of the mansion would be home to dinner that day, or whether he would be at home any time next day, or the day after that, or at the end of the week, or indeed whether he would ever come home again. Sometimes the Captain, calling in the evening dusk, in the faint hope of gaining admittance to some friendly dwelling, saw the glimmer of light under a dining-room door, and heard the clooping of corks and the pleasant jingling of glass and silver in the innermost recesses of a butler's pantry; but still the answer was—not at home, and not likely to be home. All the respectable world was to be out henceforth for Horatio Paget. But now and then at the clubs he met some young man, who had no wife at home to keep watch upon his purse and to wail piteously over a five-pound

note ill bestowed, and who took compassion on the fallen spendthrift, and believed, or pretended to believe, his story of temporary embarrassment ; and then the Captain dined sumptuously at a little French restaurant in Castle-street, Leicester-square, and took a half-bottle of chablis with his oysters, and warmed himself with chambertin that was brought to him in a dusty cobweb-shrouded bottle reposing in a wicker-basket.

But in these latter days such glimpses of sunshine very rarely illumined the dull stream of the Captain's life. Failure and disappointment had become the rule of his existence—success the rare exception. Crossing the river now on his way westward, he was wont to loiter a little on Waterloo Bridge, and to look dreamily down at the water, wondering whether the time was near at hand when, under cover of the evening dusk, he would pay his last halfpenny to the tollkeeper, and never again know the need of any earthly coin.

“ I saw a fellow in the Morgue one day,—a poor wretch who had drowned himself a week or

two before. Great God, how horrible he looked ! If there was any certainty they would find one immediately, and bury one decently, there'd be no particular horror in that kind of death. But to be found *like that*, and to lie in some riverside deadhouse down by Wapping, with a ghastly placard rotting on the rotting door, and nothing but ooze and slime and rottenness round about one—waiting to be identified ! And who knows, after all, whether a dead man doesn't *feel* that sort of thing ?”

It was after such musings as these had begun to be very common with Horatio Paget that he caught the chill which resulted in a very dangerous illness of many weeks. The late autumn was wet and cold and dreary ; but Captain Paget, although remarkably clever after a certain fashion, had never been a lover of intellectual pursuits, and imprisonment in Mrs. Kepp's shabby parlour was odious to him. When he had read every page of the borrowed newspaper, and pished and pshawed over the leaders, and groaned aloud at the announcement of some wealthy marriage made

by one of his quondam friends, or chuckled at the record of another quondam friend's insolvency—when he had poked the fire savagely half-a-dozen times in an hour, cursing the pinched grate and the bad coals during every repetition of the operation—when he had smoked his last cigar, and varnished his favourite boots, and looked out of the window, and contemplated himself gloomily in the wretched little glass over the narrow chimney-piece,—Captain Paget's intellectual resources were exhausted, and an angry impatience took possession of him. Then, in defiance of the pelt-ing rain or the lowering sky, he flung his slippers into the furthest corner—and the furthest corner of Mrs. Kepp's parlour was not very remote from the Captain's arm-chair—he drew on the stoutest of his varnished boots—and there were none of them very stout now—buttoned his perfect overcoat, adjusted his hat before the looking-glass, and sallied forth, umbrella in hand, to make his way westward. Westward always, through storm and shower, back to the haunts of his youth, went the wanderer and outcast, to see the red glow

of cheery fires reflected on the plate-glass windows of his favourite clubs; to see the lamps in spacious reading-rooms lit early in the autumn dusk, and to watch the soft light glimmering on the rich bindings of the books, and losing itself in the sombre depths of crimson draperies. To this poor worldly creature the agony of banishment from those palaces of Pall Mall or St. James's-street was as bitter as the pain of a fallen angel. It was the dullest, deadest time of the year, and there were not many loungers in those sumptuous reading-rooms, where the shaded lamps shed their subdued light on the chaste splendour of the sanctuary; so Captain Paget could haunt the scene of his departed youth without much fear of recognition: but his wanderings in the West grew more hopeless and purposeless every day. He began to understand how it was that people were never at home when he assailed their doors with his fashionable knock. He could no longer endure the humiliation of such repulses, for he began to understand that the servants knew his errand as well as their masters, and had their

answers ready, let him present himself before them when he would : so he besieged the doors of St. James's and Mayfair, Kensington Gore and Notting Hill, no longer. He knew that the bubble of his poor foolish life had burst, and that there was nothing left for him but to die.

It seemed about this time as if the end of all was very near. Captain Paget caught a chill one miserable evening on which he returned to his lodging with his garments dripping, and his beautiful varnished boots reduced to a kind of pulp ; and the chill resulted in a violent inflammation of the lungs. Then it was that a woman's hand was held out to save him, and a woman's divine tenderness cared for him in his dire extremity.

The ministering angel who comforted this helpless and broken-down wayfarer was only a low-born ignorant girl called Mary Anne Kepp—a girl who had waited upon the Captain during his residence in her mother's house, but of whom he had taken about as much notice as he had been wont to take of the coloured servants who tended him when he was with his regiment in India.

Horatio Paget had been a night-brawler and a gamester, a duellist and a reprobate, in the glorious days that were gone; but he had never been a profligate: and he did not know that the girl who brought him his breakfast and staggered under the weight of his coal-scuttle was one of the most beautiful women he had ever looked upon.

The Captain was so essentially a creature of the West-end, that Beauty without her glitter of diamonds and splendour of apparel was scarcely Beauty for him. He waited for the groom of the chambers to announce her name, and the low hum of well-bred approval to accompany her entrance, before he bowed the knee and acknowledged her perfection. The Beauties whom he remembered had received their patent from the Prince Regent, and had graduated in the houses of Devonshire and Hertford. How should the faded bachelor know that this girl, in a shabby cotton-gown, with unkempt hair dragged off her pale face, and with grimy smears from the handles of saucepans and fire-irons imprinted upon her cheeks—how should he know that she was beauti-

ful? It was only during the slow monotonous hours of his convalescence, when he lay upon the poor faded little sofa in Mrs. Kepp's parlour—the sofa that was scarcely less faded and feeble than himself—it was then, and then only, that he discovered the loveliness of the face which had been so often bent over him during his delirious wanderings.

“I have mistaken you for all manner of people, my dear,” he said to his landlady's daughter, who sat by the little Pembroke-table working, while her mother dozed in a corner with a worsted stocking drawn over her arm and a pair of spectacles resting upon her elderly nose. Mrs. Kepp and her daughter were wont to spend their evenings in the lodger's apartment now; for the invalid complained bitterly of “the horrors” when they left him.

“I have taken you for all sorts of people, Mary Anne,” pursued the Captain dreamily. “Sometimes I have fancied you were the Countess of Jersey, and I could see her smile as she looked at me when I was first presented to her. I was

very young in the beautiful Jersey's time; and then there was the other one—whom I used to drink tea with at Brighton. Ah me! what a dull world it seems nowadays! The king gone, and everything changed—everything—everything! I am a very old man, Mary Anne.”

He was fifty-two years of age; he felt quite an old man. He had spent all his money, he had outlived the best friends of his youth; for it had been his fate to adorn a declining era, and he had been a youngster among elderly patrons and associates. His patrons were dead and gone, and the men he had patronised shut their doors upon him in the day of his poverty. As for his relations, he had turned his back upon them long ago, when first he followed in the shining wake of that gorgeous vessel, the Royal George. In this hour of his penniless decline there was none to help him. To have outlived every affection and every pleasure is the chief bitterness of old age; and this bitterness Horatio Paget suffered in all its fulness, though his years were but fifty-two.

“I am a very old man, Mary Anne,” he re-

peated plaintively. But Mary Anne Kepp could not think him old. To her eyes he must for ever appear the incarnation of all that is elegant and distinguished. He was the first gentleman she had ever seen. Mrs. Kepp had given shelter to other lodgers who had called themselves gentlemen, and who had been pompous and grandiose of manner in their intercourse with the widow and her daughter; but O, what pitiful lacquered counterfeits, what Brummagem paste they had been, compared to the real gem! Mary Anne Kepp had seen varnished boots before the humble flooring of her mother's dwelling was honoured by the tread of Horatio Paget; but what clumsy vulgar boots, and what awkward plebeian feet had worn them! The lodger's slim white hands and arched instep, the patrician curve of his aquiline nose, the perfect grace of his apparel, the high-bred modulation of his courteous accents,—all these had impressed Mary Anne's tender little heart so much the more because of his poverty and loneliness. That such a man should be forgotten and deserted—that such a man should be

poor and lonely, seemed so cruel a chance to the simple maiden: and then when illness overtook him, and invested him with a supreme claim upon her tenderness and pity,—then the innocent girl lavished all the treasures of a compassionate heart upon the ruined gentleman. She had no thought of fee or reward; she knew that her mother's lodger was miserably poor, and that his payments had become more and more irregular week by week and month by month. She had no consciousness of the depth of feeling that rendered her so gentle a nurse; for her life was a busy one, and she had neither time nor inclination for any morbid brooding upon her own feelings.

She protested warmly against the Captain's lamentation respecting his age.

“The idcar of any gentleman calling hisself old at fifty!” she said—and Horatio shuddered at the supererogatory “r” and the “hisself,” though they proceeded from the lips of his consoler;—“you’ve got many, many years before you yet, sir, please God,” she added piously;

“and there’s good friends will come forward yet to help you, I make no doubt.”

Captain Paget shook his head peevishly.

“You talk as if you were telling my fortune with a pack of cards,” he said. “No, my girl, I shall have only one friend to rely upon, if ever I am well enough to go outside this house; and that friend is myself. I have spent the fortune my father left me; I have spent the price of my commission; and I have parted with every object of any value that I ever possessed—in vulgar parlance, I am cleaned out, Mary Anne. But other men have spent every sixpence belonging to them, and have contrived to live pleasantly enough for half a century afterwards; and I daresay I can do as they have done. If the wind is tempered to the shorn lamb, I suppose the hawks and vultures take care of themselves. I have tried my luck as a shorn lamb, and the tempest has been very bitter for me; so I have no alternative but to join the vultures.”

Mary Anne Kepp stared wonderingly at her mother’s lodger. She had some notion that he

had been saying something wicked and blasphemous ; but she was too ignorant and too innocent to follow his meaning.

“ O, pray don’t talk in that wild way, sir,” she entreated. “ It makes me so unhappy to hear you go on like that.”

“ And why should anything that I say make you unhappy, Mary Anne ?” asked the lodger earnestly.

There was something in his tone that set her pale face on fire with unwonted crimson, and she bent very low over her work to hide those painful blushes. She did not know that the Captain’s tone presaged a serious address ; she did not know that the grand crisis of her life was close upon her.

Horatio Paget had determined upon making a sacrifice. The doctor had told him that he owed his life to this devoted girl ; and he would have been something less than man if he had not been moved with some grateful emotion. He was grateful ; and in the dreary hours of his slow recovery he had ample leisure for the contem-

plation of the woman to whom he owed so much, if his poor worthless life could indeed be much. He saw that she was devoted to him; that she loved him more truly than he had ever been conscious of being loved before. He saw too that she was beautiful. To an ugly woman Captain Paget might have felt extremely grateful; but he could never have thought of an ugly woman as he thought of Mary Anne Kepp. The end of his contemplation and his deliberation came to this: She was beautiful, and she loved him, and his life was utterly wretched and lonely; so he determined upon proving his gratitude by a sublime sacrifice. Before the girl had lifted her face from the needlework over which she had bent to hide her blushes, Horatio Paget had asked her to be his wife. Her emotion almost overpowered her as she tried to answer him; but she struggled against it bravely, and came to the sofa on which he lay and dropped upon her knees by his side. The beggar-maid who was wooed by a king could have felt no deeper sense of her lover's condescension than that which filled the heart of this poor

simple girl as she knelt by her mother's gentleman-lodger.

"I—to be *your* wife!" she exclaimed. "O, surely, sir, you cannot mean it?"

"But I do mean it, with all my heart and soul, my dear," answered the Captain. "I'm not offering you any grand chance, Mary Anne; for I'm about as low down in the world as a man can be. But I don't mean to be poor all my life. Come, my dear, don't cry," he exclaimed, just a little impatiently—for the girl had covered her face with her hands, and tears were dropping between the poor hard-working fingers—"but lift up your head and tell me whether you will take a faded old bachelor for your husband or not."

Horatio Paget had admired many women in the bright years of his youth, and had fancied himself desperately in love more than once in his life; but it is doubtful whether the mighty passion had ever really possessed the Captain's heart, which was naturally cold and sluggish, rarely fluttered by any emotion that was not engen-

dered of selfishness. Horatio had set up an idol and had invented a religion for himself very early in life; and that idol was fashioned after his own image, and that religion had its beginning and end in his own pleasure. He might have been flattered and pleased by Miss Kepp's agitation; but he was ill and peevish; and having all his life been subject to a profound antipathy to feminine tearfulness, the girl's display of emotion annoyed him.

"Is it to be yes, or no, my dear?" he asked, with some vexation in his tone.

Mary Anne looked up at him with tearful, frightened eyes.

"O, yes, sir, if I can be any use to you, and nurse you when you are ill, and work for you till I work my fingers to the bone."

She clenched her hands spasmodically as she spoke. In imagination she was already toiling and striving for the god of her idolatry—the GENTLEMAN whose varnished boots had been to her as a glimpse of another and a fairer world than that represented by Tulliver's-terrace, Old

Kent-road. But Captain Paget checked her enthusiasm by a gentle gesture of his attenuated hands.

“That will do, my dear,” he murmured languidly; “I’m not very strong yet, and anything in the way of fuss is inexpressibly painful to me. Ah, my poor child,” he exclaimed pityingly, “if you could have seen a dinner at the Marquis of Hertford’s, you would have understood how much can be achieved without fuss. But I am talking of things you don’t understand. You will be my wife; and a very good, kind, obedient little wife, I have no doubt. That is all settled. As for working for me, my love, it would be about as much as these poor little hands could do to earn me a cigar a day—and I seldom smoke less than half-a-dozen cigars; so, you see, that is all so much affectionate nonsense. And now you may wake your mother, my dear; for I want to take a little nap, and I can’t close my eyes while that good soul is snoring so intolerably; but not a word about our little arrangement, Mary Anne, till you and your mother are alone.”

And hereupon the Captain spread a handkerchief over his face and subsided into a gentle slumber. The little scene had fatigued him; though it had been so quietly enacted, that Mrs. Kepp had slept on undisturbed by the brief fragment of domestic drama performed within a few yards of her uneasy arm-chair. Her daughter awoke her presently, and she resumed her needle-work, while Mary Anne made some tea for the beloved sleeper. The cups and saucers made more noise to-night than they were wont to make in the girl's careful hands. The fluttering of her heart seemed to communicate itself to the tips of her fingers, and the jingling of the crockery-ware betrayed the intensity of her emotion. He was to be her husband! She was to have a gentleman for a husband; and such a gentleman! Out of such base trifles as a West-end tailor's coat and a West-end workman's boots may be engendered the purest blossom of womanly love and devotion. Wisely may the modern philosopher cry that the history of the world is only a story of old clothes. Mary Anne

had begun by admiring the graces of Stultz and Hoby, and now she was ready to lay down her life for the man who wore the perishing garments!

Miss Kepp obeyed her lover's behest; and it was only on the following day, when she and her mother were alone together in the dingy little kitchen below Captain Paget's apartments, that she informed that worthy woman of the honour which had been vouchsafed to her. And thereupon Mary Anne endured the first of the long series of disappointments which were to arise out of her affection for the penniless Captain. The widow was a woman of the world, and was obstinately blind to the advantages of a union with a ruined gentleman of fifty.

"How's he to keep you, I should like to know?" Mrs. Kepp exclaimed, as the girl stood blushing before her after having told her story; "if he can't pay me regular—and you know the difficulty I've had to get his money, Mary Anne. If he can't keep hisself, how's he to keep you?"

"Don't talk like that, mother," cried the girl,

wincing under her parent's practical arguments :
“you go on as if all I cared for was being fed and clothed. Besides, Captain Paget is not going to be poor always. He told me so last night, when he—”

“*He* told you so!” echoed the honest widow with unmitigated scorn : “hasn't he told me times and often that I should have my rent regular after this week, and regular after that week ; and have I *ever* had it regular ? And ain't I keeping him out of charity now—a poor widow-woman like me—which I may be wanting charity myself before long ; and if it wasn't for your whimpering and going on he'd have been out of the house three weeks ago, when the doctor said he was well enough to be moved ; for I ast him.”

“And you'd have turned him out to die in the streets, mother !” cried Mary ; “I didn't think you was so 'artless.”

From this time there was ill-feeling between Mrs. Kepp and her daughter, who had been hitherto one of the most patient and obedient of children. The fanatic can never forgive the wretch who disbelieves in the divinity of his god ; and women

who love as blindly and foolishly as Mary Anne Kepp are the most bigoted of worshippers. The girl could not forgive her mother's disparagement of her idol,—the mother had no mercy upon her daughter's folly; and after much wearisome contention and domestic misery—carefully hidden from the penniless sybarite in the parlour—after many tears and heart-burnings, and wakeful nights and prayerful watches, Mary Anne Kepp consented to leave the house quietly one morning with the gentleman lodger while the widow had gone to market. Miss Kepp left a piteous little note for her mother, rather ungrammatical, but very womanly and tender, imploring pardon for her want of duty; and, “O, mother, if you knew how good and nobel he is, you coudent be angry with me for luving him has I do, and we shall come back to you after oure marige, wich you will be pade up honourabel to the last farthin’.”

After writing this epistle in the kitchen, with more deliberation and more smudging than Captain Paget would have cared to behold in the bride of his choice, Mary Anne attired herself in

her Sabbath-day raiment, and left Tulliver's-terrace with the Captain in a cab. She would fain have taken a little lavender-paper-covered box that contained the remainder of her wardrobe; but after surveying it with a shudder, Captain Paget told her that such a box would condemn them *anywhere*.

"You may get on sometimes without luggage, my dear," he said sententiously; "but with such luggage as *that*, never!"

The girl obeyed without comprehending. It was not often that she understood her lover's meaning; nor did he particularly care that she should understand him. He talked to her rather in the same spirit in which one talks to a faithful canine companion—as Napoleon III. may talk to his favourite Nero: "I have great plans yet unfulfilled, my honest Nero, though you may not be wise enough to guess their nature. And we must have another Boulevard, old fellow; and we must settle that little dispute about Venetia; and we must do something for those unfortunate Poles, eh—good dog?" and so on.

Captain Paget drove straight to a registrar's-office, where the new marriage-act enabled him to unite himself to Miss Kepp *sans façon*, in presence of the cabman and a woman who had been cleaning the door-step. The Captain went through the brief ceremonial as coolly as if it had been the settlement of a water-rate, and was angered by the tears that poor Mary Anne shed under her cheap black veil. He had forgotten the poetic superstition in favour of a wedding-ring, but he slipped a little onyx ring off his own finger and put it on the clumsier finger of his bride. It was the last of his jewels—the rejected of the pawn-brokers, who, not being learned in antique intaglios, had condemned the ring as trumpery. There is always something a little ominous in the bridegroom's forgetfulness of that simple golden circle which typifies an eternal union; and a superstitious person might have drawn a sinister augury from the subject of Captain Paget's intaglio, which was a head of Nero—an emperor whose wife was by no means the happiest of women. But as neither Mary Anne nor the re-

gistrar, neither the cabman nor the charwoman who had been cleaning the door-step, had ever heard of Nero, and as Horatio Paget was much too indifferent to be superstitious, there was no one to draw evil inferences : and Mary Anne went away with her gentleman husband, proud and happy, with a happiness that was only disturbed now and then by the image of an infuriated mother.

Captain Paget took his bride to some charming apartments in Halfmoon-street, Mayfair ; and she was surprised to hear him tell the landlady that he and his wife had just arrived from Devonshire, and that they meant to stay a week or so in London, *en passant*, before starting for the Continent.

“ My wife has spent the best part of her life in the country,” said the Captain, “ so I suppose I must show her some of the sights of London in spite of the abominable weather. But the deuce of it is, that my servant has misunderstood my directions, and gone on to Paris with the luggage. However, we can set that all straight to-morrow.”

Nothing could be more courteously acquiescent than the manner of the landlady; for Captain Paget had offered her references, and the people to whom he referred were among the magnates of the land. The Captain knew enough of human nature to know that if references are only sufficiently imposing, they are very unlikely to be verified. The swindler who refers his dupe to the Duke of Sutherland and Baring Brothers has a very good chance of getting his respectability accepted without inquiry, on the mere strength of those sacred names.

From this time until the day of her death Mary Anne Paget very seldom heard her husband make any statement which she did not know to be false. He had joined the ranks of the vultures. He had lain down upon his bed of sickness a gentlemanly beggar; he arose from that couch of pain and weariness a swindler.

Now began those petty shifts and miserable falsifications whereby the birds of prey thrive on the flesh and blood of hapless pigeons. Now the

dovecotes were fluttered by a new destroyer—a gentlemanly vulture, whose suave accents and perfect manners were fatal to the unwary. Henceforth Horatio Cromie Nugent Paget flourished and fattened upon the folly of his fellow-men. As promoter of joint-stock companies that never saw the light; as treasurer of loan-offices where money was never lent; as a gentleman with capital about to introduce a novel article of manufacture from the sale of which a profit of five thousand a-year would infallibly be realised, and desirous to meet with another gentleman of equal capital; as the mysterious X. Y. Z. who will—for so small a recompense as thirty postage-stamps—impart the secret of an elegant and pleasing employment, whereby seven-pound-ten a-week may be made by any individual, male or female;—under every flimsy disguise with which the swindler hides his execrable form, Captain Paget plied his cruel trade, and still contrived to find fresh dupes. Of course there were occasions when the pigeons were slow to flutter into the fascinating snare, and when the vulture had a bad time of it; and

it was a common thing for the Captain to sink from the splendour of Mayfair or St. James's-street into some dingy transpontine hiding-place. But he never went back to Tulliver's-terrace, though Mary Anne pleaded piteously for the payment of her poor mother's debt. When her husband was in funds, he patted her head affectionately, and told her that he would see about it—*i.e.* the payment of Mrs. Kepp's bill: while, if she ventured to mention the subject to him when his purse was scantily furnished, he would ask her fiercely how he was to satisfy her mother's extortionate claims when he had not so much as a sixpence for his own use.

Mrs. Kepp's bill was never paid, and Mary Anne never saw her mother's face again. Mrs. Paget was one of those meek, loving creatures who are essentially cowardly. She could not bring herself to encounter her mother without the money owed by the Captain; she could not bring herself to endure the widow's reproaches, the questioning that would be so horribly painful to answer, the taunts that would torture her poor sorrowful heart.

Alas for her brief dream of love and happiness! Alas for her foolish worship of the gentleman lodger! She knew now that her mother had been wiser than herself, and that it would have been better for her if she had renounced the shadowy glory of an alliance with Horatio Cromie Nugent Paget; whose string of high-sounding names, written on the cover of an old wine-book, had not been without its influence on the ignorant girl. The widow's daughter knew very little happiness during the few years of her wedded life. To be hurried from place to place, to dine in Mayfair to-day, and to eat your dinner at a shilling ordinary in Whitecross-street to-morrow; to wear fine clothes that have not been paid for, and to take them off your back at a moment's notice when they are required for the security of the friendly pawnbroker; to know that your life is a falsehood and a snare, and that to leave a place is to leave contempt and execration behind you;—these things constitute the burden of a woman whose husband lives by his wits. And over and above these miseries, Mrs. Paget had to

endure all the variations of temper to which the schemer is subject. If the pigeons dropped readily into the snare, and if their plumage proved well worth the picking, the Captain was very kind to his wife, after his own fashion ; that is to say, he took her out with him, and after lecturing her angrily because of the shabbiness of her bonnet, bought her a new one, and gave her a dinner that made her ill, and then sent her home in a cab, while he finished the evening in more congenial society. But if the times were bad for the vulture tribe—O, then, what a gloomy companion for the domestic hearth was the elegant Horatio ! After smiling his false smile all day, while rage and disappointment were gnawing at his heart, it was a kind of relief to the Captain to be moody and savage by his own fireside. The human vulture has something of the ferocity of his feathered prototype. The man who lives upon his fellow-men has need to harden his heart ; for one sentiment of compassion, one touch of human pity, would shatter his finest scheme in the hour of its fruition. Horatio Paget and compassion

parted fellowship very early in the course of his unscrupulous career. What if the pigeon has a widowed mother dependent on his prosperity, or half-a-dozen children who will be involved in his ruin? Is the hawk to forego his natural prey for any such paltry consideration as a vulgar old woman or a brood of squalling brats?

Captain Paget was not guilty of any persistent unkindness towards the woman whose fate he had deigned to link with his own. The consciousness that he had conferred a supreme honour on Mary Anne Kepp by offering her his hand, and a share of his difficulties, never deserted him. He made no attempt to elevate the ignorant girl into companionship with himself. He shuddered when she misplaced her h's, and turned from her peevishly with a muttered oath when she was more than usually ungrammatical: but though he found it disagreeable to hear her, he would have found it troublesome to set her right; and trouble was a thing which Horatio Paget held in gentlemanly aversion. The idea that the mode of his existence could be repulsive to his wife—that this low-born

and low-bred girl could have scruples that he never felt, and might suffer agonies of remorse and shame of which his coarser nature was incapable — never entered the Captain's mind. It would have been too great an absurdity for the daughter of plebeian Kepps to affect a tenderness of conscience unknown to the scion of Pagets and Cromies and Nugents. Mary Anne was afraid of her elegant husband: and she worshipped and waited upon him in meek silence, keeping the secret of her own sorrows, and keeping it so well that he never guessed the manifold sources of that pallor of countenance and hollow brightness of eye which had of late annoyed him when he looked at his wife. She had borne him a child; a sweet girl baby, with those great black eyes that always have rather a weird look in the face of infancy; and she would fain have clung to the infant as the hope and consolation of her joyless life. But the vulture is not a domestic bird, and a baby would have been an impediment in the rapid hegiras which Captain Paget and his wife were wont to make. The Captain put an advertisement in a

daily paper before the child was a week old ; and in less than a fortnight after Mary Anne had looked at the baby face for the first time, she was called upon to surrender her treasure to an elderly woman of fat and greasy aspect, who had agreed to bring the infant up “ by hand ” in a miserable little street in a remote and dreary district lying between Vauxhall and Battersea.

Mary Anne gave up the child uncomplainingly ; as meekly as she would have surrendered herself if the Captain had brought a masked executioner to her bed-side, and had told her a block was prepared for her in the adjoining chamber. She had no idea of resistance to the will of her husband. She endured her existence for nearly five years after the birth of her child, and during those miserable years the one effort of her life was to secure the miserable stipend paid for the little girl’s maintenance ; but before the child’s fifth birthday the mother faded off the face of the earth. She died in a miserable lodging not very far from Tulliver’s-terrace, expiring in the arms of a landlady who comforted her in her hour of need as she

had comforted the ruined gentleman. Captain Paget was a prisoner in Whitecross-street at the time of his wife's death, and was much surprised when he missed her morning visits and the little luxuries she had been wont to bring him.

He had missed her for more than a week, and had written to her twice—rather angrily on the second occasion—when a rough unkempt boy in corduroy waited upon him in the dreary ward, where he and half-a-dozen other depressed and melancholy men sat at little tables writing letters, or pretending to read newspapers, and looking at one another furtively every now and then. There is no prisoner so distracted by his own cares that he will not find time to wonder what his neighbour is “in for.”

The boy had received instructions to be careful how he imparted his dismal tidings to the “poor dear gentleman;” but the lad grew nervous and bewildered at sight of the Captain's fierce hook-nose and scrutinising gray eyes, and blurted out his news without any dismal note of warning.

“The lady died at two o'clock this morning,

please, sir; and mother said I was to come and tell you, please, sir."

Captain Paget staggered under the blow.

"Good God!" he cried, as he dropped upon a rickety Windsor chair, that creaked under his weight; "and I did not even know that she was ill!"

Still less did he know that all her married life had been one long heart-sickness—one monotonous agony of remorse and shame.

CHAPTER III.

“HEART BARE, HEART HUNGRY, VERY POOR.”

DIANA PAGET left the Kursaal, and walked slowly along the pretty rustic street ; now dawdling before a little printshop whose contents she knew by heart, now looking back at the great windows of that temple of pleasure which she had just quitted.

“What do they care what becomes of *me*?” she thought, as she looked up at the blank vacant windows, for the last time before she left the main street of Forêtdechêne, and turned into a straggling side-street, whose rugged pavement sloped upward towards the pine-clad hills. The house in which Captain Paget had taken up his abode was a tall white habitation, situated in the narrowest of the narrow bye-ways that intersect the main street of the pretty Belgian watering-place ; a lane in which the inhabitants of opposite houses

may shake hands with one another out of the window, and where the odour of the cabbages and onions so liberally employed in the *cuisine* of the native offends the nose of the foreigner from sunrise to sunset.

Diana paused for a moment at the entrance to this lane, but, after a brief deliberation, walked onwards.

“What is the use of my going home?” she thought; “*they* won’t be home for hours to come.”

She walked slowly along the hilly street, and from the street into a narrow pathway winding upward through the pine-wood. Here she was quite alone, and the stillness of the place soothed her. She took off her hat and slung the faded ribbons across her arm; and the warm breeze lifted the loose hair from her forehead as she wandered upwards. It was a very beautiful face from which that loose dark hair was lifted by the summer wind. Diana Paget inherited something of the soft loveliness of Mary Anne Kepp, and a little of the patrician beauty of the Pagets. The

eyes were like those which had watched Horatio Paget on his bed of sickness in Tulliver's-terrace. The resolute curve of the thin flexible lips and the fine modelling of the chin were hereditary attributes of the Nugent Pagets; and a resemblance to the lower part of Miss Paget's face might have been traced in many a sombre portrait of dame and cavalier at Thorpehaven Manor; where a Nugent Paget, who acknowledged no kindred with the disreputable Captain, was now master.

The girl's reflections as she slowly climbed the hill were not pleasant. The thoughts of youth should be very beautiful; but youth that has been spent in the companionship of reprobates and tricksters is something worse than age; for experience has taught it to be bitter, while time has not taught it to be patient. For Diana Paget childhood had been joyless, and girlhood lonely. That blank and desolate region, that dreary flat of fenny waste ground between Vauxhall and Battersea, on which the child's eyes had first looked, had been typical of her loveless childhood. With her mother's death faded the one

ray of light that had illumined her desolation. She was shifted from one nurse to another ; and her nurses were not allowed to love her, for she remained with them as an encumbrance and a burden. It was so difficult for the Captain to pay the pitiful sum demanded for his daughter's support : or rather it was so much easier for him not to pay it. So there always came a time when Diana was delivered at her father's lodgings like a parcel, by an indignant nurse, who proclaimed the story of her wrongs in shrill, feminine treble, and who was politely informed by the Captain that her claim was a common debt, and that she had the remedy in her own hands, but that the same code of laws which provided her with that remedy forbade any obnoxious demonstration of her anger in a gentleman's apartment. And then Miss Paget, after hearing all the tumult and discussion, would be left alone with her father, and would speedily perceive that her presence was disagreeable to him.

When she outgrew the age of humble foster-mothers and cottages in the dreariest of the out-

lying suburbs, the Captain sent his daughter to school: and on this occasion he determined on patronising a person whom he had once been too proud to remember among the list of his kindred. There are poor and straggling branches upon every family tree; and the Pagets of Thorpehaven had needy cousins who, in the mighty battle of life, were compelled to fight amongst the rank and file. One of these poor cousins was a Miss Priscilla Paget, who at an early age had exhibited that affection for intellectual pursuits and that carelessness as to the duties of the toilet which are supposed to distinguish the predestined blue-stocking. Left quite alone in the world, Priscilla put her educational capital to good use; and after holding the position of principal governess for nearly twenty years in a prosperous boarding-school at Brompton, she followed her late employer to her grave with unaffected sorrow, and within a month of the funeral invested her savings in the purchase of the business, and established herself as mistress of the mansion.

To this lady Captain Paget confided his daugh-

ter's education; and in Priscilla Paget's house Diana found a shelter that was almost like a home, until her kinswoman became weary of promises that were never kept, and pitiful sums paid on account of a debt that grew bigger every day—very weary likewise of conciliatory hampers of game and barrels of oysters, and all the flimsy devices of a debtor who is practised in the varied arts of the gentlemanly swindler.

The day came when Miss Paget resolved to be rid of her profitless charge; and once more Diana found herself delivered like a parcel of unordered goods at the door of her father's lodging. Those are precocious children who learn their first lessons in the school of poverty; and the girl had been vaguely conscious of the degradation involved in this process at the age of five. How much more keenly did she feel the shame at the age of fifteen! Priscilla did her best to lessen the pain of her pupil's departure.

“It isn't that I've any fault to find with you, Diana, though you must remember that I have heard some complaints of your temper,” she said

with gentle gravity; "but your father is too trying! If he didn't make me any promises, I should think better of him. If he told me frankly that he couldn't pay me, and asked me to keep you, out of charity—" Diana drew herself up with a little shiver at this word—"why, I might turn it over in my mind, and see if it could be done. But to be deceived time after time, as I've been deceived—you know the solemn language your father has used, Diana, for you have heard him; and to rely on a sum of money on a certain date, as I have relied again and again, after Horatio's assurance that I might depend upon him—it's too bad, Diana; it's more than anyone can endure. If you were two or three years older, and further advanced in your education, I might manage to do something for you by making you useful with the little ones; but I can't afford to keep you and clothe you during the next three years for nothing, and so I have no alternative but to send you home."

The "home" to which Diana Paget was taken upon this occasion was a lodging over a toyshop

in the Westminster-road, where the Captain lived in considerable comfort on the proceeds of a Friendly and Philanthropic Loan Society.

But no very cordial welcome awaited Diana in the gaudily-furnished drawing-room over the toyshop. She found her father sleeping placidly in his easy-chair, while a young man, who was a stranger to her, sat at a table near the window writing letters. It was a dull November day—a very dreary day on which to find oneself thrown suddenly on a still drearier world; and in the Westminster-bridge-road the lamps were already making yellow patches of sickly light amidst the afternoon fog.

The Captain twitched his silk handkerchief off his face with an impatient gesture as Diana entered the room.

“Now then, what is it?” he asked peevishly, without looking at the intruder.

He recognised her in the next moment; but that first impatient salutation was about as warm a welcome as any which Miss Paget received from her father. In sad and bitter truth, he did not

care for her. His marriage with Mary Ann Kepp had been the one grateful impulse of his life; and even the sentiment which had prompted that marriage had been by no means free from the taint of selfishness. But he had been quite unprepared to find that this grand sacrifice of his life should involve another sacrifice in the maintenance of a daughter he did not want; and he was very much inclined to quarrel with the destiny that had given him this burden.

“If you had been a boy, I might have made you useful to me sooner or later,” the Captain said to his daughter when he found himself alone with her late on the night of her return; “but what on earth am I to do with a daughter, in the unsettled life I lead? However, since that old harridan has sent you back, you must manage in the best way you can,” concluded Captain Paget with a discontented sigh.

From this time Diana Paget had inhabited the nest of the vultures, and every day had brought its new lesson of trickery and falsehood. There are men—and bad men too—who would have

tried to keep the secret of their shifts and mean-
nesses hidden from an only child: but Horatio
Paget believed himself the victim of man's ingra-
titude, and his misdoings the necessity of an evil
destiny. It is not easy for the unsophisticated
intellect to gauge those moral depths to which the
man who lives by his wits must sink before his
career is finished, or to understand how, with
every step in the swindler's downward road, the
conscience grows tougher, the perception of shame
blunter, the savage selfishness of the animal nature
stronger. Diana Paget had discovered some of
her father's weaknesses during her miserable child-
hood: and in the days of her unpaid-for schooling
she had known that his most solemn promises were
no more to be relied on than the capricious breath
of a summer breeze. So the revelations which
awaited her under the paternal roof were not ut-
terly strange or entirely unexpected. Day by day
she grew more accustomed to that atmosphere of
fraud and falsehood. The sense of shame never
left her; for there is a pride that thrives amidst
poverty and degradation, and of such pride Diana

Paget possessed no small share. She writhed under the consciousness that she was the daughter of a man who had forfeited all right to the esteem of his fellow-men. She valued the good opinion of others, and would fain have been beloved and admired, trusted and respected ; for she was ambitious : and the thought that she might one day do something which should lift her above the vulgar level was the day-dream that had consoled her in many an hour of humiliation and discomfort. Diana Paget felt the Captain's shame as keenly as her mother had felt it ; but the remorse which had agonised gentle Mary Anne, the tender compassion for others which had wrung that fond and faithful heart, had no place in the breast of the Captain's daughter.

Diana felt so much compassion for herself, that she had none left to bestow upon other people. Her father's victims might be miserable, but was not she infinitely more wretched ? The landlady who found her apartments suddenly tenantless and her rent unpaid might complain of the hardness of her fortune ; but was it not harder for Diana,

with the sensitive feelings and the keen pride of the Pagets, to endure all the degradation involved in the stealthy carrying away of luggage and a secret departure under cover of night?

At first Miss Paget had been inclined to feel aggrieved by the presence of the young man whom she had seen writing letters in the gloomy dusk of the November afternoon; but in due time she came to accept him as a companion, and to feel that her joyless life would have been drearier without him. He was the secretary of the Friendly and Philanthropic Loan Society, and of any other society organised by the Captain. He was Captain Paget's amanuensis and representative: Captain Paget's tool, but not Captain Paget's dupe; for Valentine Hawkehurst was not of that stuff of which dupes are made.

The man who lives by his wits has need of a faithful friend and follower. The chief of the vultures must not be approached too easily. There must be a preparatory ordeal, an outer chamber to be passed, before the victim is introduced to the sanctuary which is irradiated by the silver

veil of the prophet. Captain Paget found an able coadjutor in Valentine Hawkehurst, who answered one of those tempting advertisements in which A. B. C. or X. Y. Z. was wont to offer a salary of three hundred a-year to any gentlemanly person capable of performing the duties of secretary to a newly-established company. It was only after responding to this promising offer, that the applicant was informed that he must possess one indispensable qualification in the shape of a capital of five hundred pounds. Mr. Hawkehurst laughed aloud when the Captain imparted this condition with that suave and yet dignified manner which was peculiar to him.

“I ought to have known it was a dodge of that kind,” said the young man coolly. “Those very good things—duties light and easy, hours from twelve to four, speedy advancement certain for a conscientious and gentlemanly person, and so on—are always of the genus *do*. Your advertisement is very cleverly worded, my dear sir; only it’s like the rest of them, rather *too* clever. It is so difficult for a clever man not to be *too*

clever. The prevailing weakness of the human intellect seems to me to be exaggeration. However, as I haven't a five-pound note in the world, or the chance of getting one, I'll wish you good-morning, Captain Paget."

There are people whose blood would have been turned to ice by the stony glare of indignation with which Horatio Paget regarded the man who had dared to question his probity. But Mr. Hawkehurst had done with strong impressions long before he met the Captain; and he listened to that gentleman's freezing reproof with an admiring smile. Out of this very unpromising beginning there arose a kind of friendship between the two men. Horatio Paget had for some time been in need of a clever tool; and in the young man whose cool insolence rose superior to his own dignity he perceived the very individual whom he had long been seeking. The young man who was unabashed by the indignation of a scion of Nugents and Cromies and Pagets must be utterly impervious to the sense of awe; and it was just such an impervious young man that the Captain wanted

as his coadjutor. Thus arose the alliance, which grew stronger every day ; until Valentine took up his abode under the roof of his employer and patron, and made himself more thoroughly at home there than the unwelcome daughter of the house.

The history of Valentine Hawkehurst's past existence was tolerably well known to the Captain ; but the only history of the young man's early life ever heard by Diana was rather vague and fragmentary. She discovered, little by little, that he was the son of a spendthrift *littérateur*, who had passed the greater part of his career within the rules of the King's Bench ; that he had run away from home at the age of fifteen, and had tried his fortune in all those professions which require no educational ordeal, and which seem to offer themselves invitingly to the scapegrace and adventurer. At fifteen Valentine Hawkehurst had been errand-boy in a newspaper office ; at seventeen a penny-a-liner, whose flimsy was pretty sure of admission in the lower class of Sunday papers. In the course of a very brief career he had been a provincial actor, a

manège rider in a circus, a billiard-marker, and a betting agent. It was after having exhausted these liberal professions that he encountered Captain Paget.

Such was the man whom Horatio Paget admitted to companionship with his only daughter. It can scarcely be pleaded in excuse for the Captain that he might have admitted a worse man than Valentine Hawkehurst to his family circle, for the Captain had never taken the trouble to sound the depths of his coadjutor's nature. There is nothing so short-sighted as selfishness ; and beyond the narrow circle immediately surrounding himself, there was no man more blind than Horatio Paget.

It was dusk when Diana grew tired of the lonely pathways among the hills, where the harmonies of a band stationed in the valley were wafted in gusts of music by the fitful summer breeze. The loneliness of the place soothed the girl's feverish spirits ; and, seated in a little classic temple upon the summit of a hill, she looked pen-

sively downward through the purple mists at the newly-lighted lamps twinkling faintly in the valley.

“One does not feel the sting of one’s shabbiness here,” thought Miss Paget: “the trees are all dressed alike. Nature makes no distinction. It is only Fortune who treats her children unfairly.”

The Captain’s daughter walked slowly back to the little town in the deepening dusk. The lodging occupied by Horatio Paget and his household consisted of four roomy chambers on the second story of a big rambling house. The rooms were meanly furnished, and decorated with the tawdry ornamentation dear to the continental mind; but there were long wide windows and an iron balcony, on which Diana Paget was often pleased to sit.

She found the sitting-room dark and empty. No dinner had been prepared; for on lucky days the Captain and his protégé were wont to dine at the *table-d’hôte* of one of the hotels or to feast sumptuously *à la carte*, while on unlucky days

they did not dine at all. Diana found a roll and some cream cheese in a roomy old cupboard that was flavoured with mice; and after making a very indifferent meal in the dusky chamber, she went out upon the balcony, and sat there looking down upon the lighted town.

She had been sitting there for nearly an hour in the same attitude, when the door of the sitting-room was opened, and a footstep sounded behind her. She knew the step; and although she did not lift her head, her eyes took a new brightness in the summer dusk, and the listless grace of her attitude changed to a statuesque rigidity, though there was no change in the attitude itself.

She did not stir till a hand was laid softly on her shoulder, and a voice said,

“Diana!”

The speaker was Valentine Hawkehurst, the young man whose entrance to the golden temple had been so closely watched by Captain Paget’s daughter.

She rose as he spoke, and turned to him.

“You have been losing, I suppose, Mr. Hawke-

hurst," she said, "or you would not have come home?"

"I am compelled to admit that you are right in your premise, Miss Paget, and your deduction is scarcely worth discussion. I *have* been losing—confoundedly; and as they don't give credit at the board of green cloth yonder, there was no excuse for my staying. Your father has not been holding his own within the last hour or two; but when I left the rooms he was going to the Hôtel d'Orange with some French fellows for a quiet game of écarté. Our friend the Captain is a great card, Miss Paget, and has a delightful talent for picking up distinguished acquaintance."

There are few daughters who would have cared to hear a father spoken of in this free-and-easy manner; but Diana Paget was quite unmoved. She had resumed her old attitude, and sat looking towards the lighted windows of the Kursaal, while Mr. Hawkehurst lounged against the angle of the window with his hands in his pockets and a cigar in his mouth.

For three years Valentine Hawkehurst had

lived in constant companionship with the Captain's daughter; and in that time his manner to her had undergone considerable variation. Of late it had been something in the manner of an elder brother, whose fraternal breast is impervious to the influence of a sister's loveliness or a sister's fascination. If Diana Paget had been a snub-nosed young person with red hair and white eye-lashes, Mr. Hawkehurst could scarcely have treated her with a more friendly indifference, a more brotherly familiarity.

Unhappily this line of conduct, which is perhaps the wisest and most honourable plan that a man can pursue when he finds himself thrown into a dangerously familiar association with a beautiful and unprotected woman, is the very line of proceeding which a beautiful woman can never bring herself to forgive. A chivalrous stiffness, a melancholy dignity, a frozen frigidity, which suggest the fiery bubbling of the lava flood beneath the icy surface,—these are delightful to the female mind. But friendly indifference and fraternal cordiality constitute the worst insult that

can be offered to her beauty, the most bitter outrage upon the majesty of her sex.

"I suppose it will be midnight before papa comes home, Mr. Hawkehurst," Diana said abruptly, when her companion had finished his cigar, and had thrown the end of it over the balcony.

"Past midnight more likely, Miss Paget. May I ask how I have become Mr. Hawkehurst all of a sudden, when for the last three years I have been usually known as Valentine—or Val?"

The girl turned her head with a gesture in which the carelessness of his own manner was imitated. She stole a rapid look at him as she answered, "What does it matter whether I call you by one name or another?"

"What does anything matter? I believe Mr. Toots was an unconscious philosopher. There is nothing in the world of any consequence, except money. Go and look at those poor devils yonder, and you will see what *that* is worth," he cried, pointing to the lighted Kursaal; "there you behold the one great truth of the universe in action.

There is nothing but money, and men are the slaves of money, and life is only another name for the pursuit of money. Go and look at beauty yonder fading in the light and heat; at youth that changes to age before your eyes; at friendship which turns to hate when the chances of the game are with my friend and against me. The Kursaal is the world in little, Diana; and this great globe of ours is nothing but a gigantic gaming-table—a mighty temple for the worship of the golden calf.”

“Why do you imitate those people yonder, if you despise them so heartily?”

“Because I am like them and of them. I tell you that money is the beginning and end of all things. Why am I here, and why is my life made up of baseness and lies? Because my father was an improvident scoundrel, and did not leave me five hundred a year. I wonder what I should have been like, by the bye, if I had been blest with five hundred a year.”

“Honest and happy,” answered the girl earnestly. She forgot her simulated indifference, and

looked at him with sad earnest eyes. He met the glance, and the expression of his own face changed from its cynical smile to a thoughtful sadness.

“Honest perhaps ; and yet I almost doubt if anything under five thousand a year would have kept me honest. Decidedly not happy ; the men who can be happy on five hundred a year are made of a duller stuff than the clay which serves for a Hawkehurst.”

“You talk about not being happy with five hundred a year !” Diana exclaimed impatiently. “Surely any decent existence would be happiness to you compared to the miserable life you lead,—the shameful, degraded life which shuts you out of the society of respectable people and reduces you to the level of a thief. If you had any pride, Valentine, you would feel it as bitterly as I do.”

“But I haven’t any pride. As for my life,—well, I suppose it is shameful and degraded, and I know that it’s often miserable ; but it suits me better than jog-trot respectability. I can dine one day upon truffled turkey and champagne, another

day upon bread and cheese and small beer ; but I couldn't eat beef and mutton always. That's what kills people of my temperament. There are born scamps in the world, Diana, and I am one of them. My name is Robert Macaire, and I was created for the life I lead. Keep clear of me if you have any hankering after better things ; but don't try to change my nature, for it is wasted labour."

"Valentine, it is so cruel of you to talk like that."

"Cruel to whom?"

"To—those—who care for you."

It was quite dark now ; but even in the darkness Diana Paget's head drooped a little as she said this. Mr. Hawkehurst laughed aloud.

"Those who care for me !" he cried ; "no such people ever lived. My father was a drunken scoundrel, who suffered his children to grow up about him as he would have suffered a litter of puppies to sprawl upon his hearth, only because there was less trouble in letting them lie there than in kicking them out. My mother was a

good woman in the beginning, I know ; but she must have been something more than a mortal woman if she had not lost some of her goodness in twelve years of such a life as she led with my father. I believe she was fond of me, poor soul ; but she died six months before I ran away from a lodging in the Rules, which it is the bitterest irony to speak of as my home. Since then I have been Robert Macaire, and have about as many friends as such a man usually has."

"You can scarcely wonder if you have few friends," said Miss Paget, "since there is no one in the world whom you love."

She watched him through the darkness after saying this ; watched him closely, though it was too dark for her to see the expression of his face, and any emotion to which her words might have given rise could be betrayed only by some gesture or change of attitude. She watched him in vain, for he did not stir. But after a pause of some minutes he said slowly—

"Such a man as I cannot afford to love anyone. What have I to offer to the woman I might

pretend to love? Truth, or honour, or honesty, or constancy? Those are commodities I have never dealt in. If I knew what they are, and that I have never possessed them, it is about as much as I do know of them. If I have any redeeming grace, Diana Paget, it lies in the fact that I know what a worthless wretch I am. Your father thinks he is a great man, a noble suffering creature, and that the world has ill-used him. I know that I am a scoundrel, and that let my fellow-men treat me as badly as they please, they can never give me worse usage than I deserve. And am I a man to talk about love, or to ask a woman to share my life? Good God, what a noble partner I should offer her! what a happy existence I could assure her!”

“But if the woman loved you, she would only love you better for being unfortunate.”

“Yes, if she was very young and foolish and romantic. But don’t you think I should be a villain if I traded on her girlish folly? She would love me for a year or two perhaps, and bear all the changes of my temper; but the day

would come when she would awake from her delusion, and know that she had been cheated. She would see other women—less gifted than herself, probably—and would see the market they had made of their charms; would see them rich and honoured and happy, and would stand aside in the muddy streets to be splashed by the dirt from their carriage-wheels. And then she would consider the price for which she had bartered her youth and her beauty, and would hate the man who had cheated her. No, Diana, I am not such a villain as the world may think me. I am down in the dirt myself, and I'm used to it. I won't drag a woman into the gutter just because I may happen to love her."

There was a long silence after this—a silence during which Diana Paget sat looking down at the twinkling lights of the Kursaal. Valentine lighted a second cigar and smoked it out, still in silence. The clocks struck eleven as he threw the end of his cigar away; a tiny, luminous speck, which shot through the misty atmosphere below the balcony like a falling star.

“I may as well go and see how your father is getting on yonder,” he said, as the spark of light vanished in the darkness below. “Good night, Diana. Don’t sit too long in the cold night-air; and don’t sit up for your father—there’s no knowing when he may be home.”

The girl did not answer him. She listened to the shutting of the door as it closed behind him, and then folded her arms upon the iron rail of the balcony, laid her head upon them, and wept silently. Her life was very dreary, and it seemed to her as if the last hope which had sustained her against an unnatural despair had been taken away from her to-night.

Twelve o’clock sounded with a feeble little *corillon* from one of the steeples, and still she sat with her head resting upon her folded arms. Her eyes were quite dry by this time, for with her tears were very rare, and the passion which occasioned them must needs be intense. The night-air grew chill and damp; but although she shivered now and then beneath that creeping, penetrating cold which is peculiar to night-

air, she did not stir from her place in the balcony till she was startled by the opening of the door in the room behind her.

All was dark within, but Diana Paget was very familiar with the footstep that sounded on the carpetless floor. It was Valentine Hawkehurst, and not her father, whose step her quick ear distinguished.

“Diana,” he called; and then he muttered in a tone of surprise, “all dark still. Ah! she has gone to bed, I suppose. That’s a pity!” The figure in the balcony caught his eye at this moment.

“What in goodness’ name has kept you out there all this time?” he asked; “do you want to catch your death of cold?”

He was standing by the mantelpiece lighting a candle as he asked this unceremonious question. The light of the candle shone full upon his face when Diana came into the room, and she could see that he was paler than usual.

“Is there anything the matter?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes ; there is a great deal the matter. You will have to leave Forêtdechêne by the earliest train to-morrow morning, on the first stage of your journey to England. Look here, my girl ! I can give you just about the money that will carry you safely to London : and when you are once there, Providence must do the rest.”

“Valentine, what do you mean ?”

“I mean, that you cannot get away from this place — you cannot dis sever your self from the people you have been living with, too soon. Come, come, don’t shiver, child. Take a few drops of this cognac, and let me see the colour come back to your face before I say any more.”

He poured the dregs of a bottle of brandy into a glass, and made her drink the spirit. He was obliged to force the rim of the glass between her set teeth before he could succeed in this.

“Come, Diana,” he said, after she had drunk, “you have been a pupil in the school of adversity so long, that you ought to be able to take misfortunes pretty quietly. There’s a balance struck, somehow or other, depend upon it, my girl ; and

the prosperous people who pay their debts have to suffer, as well as the Macaire family. I'm a scamp and a scoundrel, but I'm your true friend nevertheless, Diana; and you must promise to take my advice. Tell me that you will trust me."

"I have no one else to trust."

"No one else in this place. But in England you have your old friend,—the woman with whom you were at school. Do you think she would refuse to give you a temporary home if you sued to her *in formâ pauperis*?"

"No, I don't think she would refuse. She was very good to me. But why am I to go back to London?"

"Because to stay here would be ruin and disgrace to you; because the tie that links you to Horatio Paget must be cut at any hazard."

"But why?"

"For the best or worst of reasons. Your father has been trying a trick to-night which has been hitherto so infallible, that I suppose he had grown careless as to his execution of it. Or perhaps he took a false measure of the man he

was playing with. In any case, he has been found out, and has been arrested by the police.”

“Arrested, for cheating at cards!” exclaimed the girl, with a look of unspeakable disgust and horror. Valentine’s arm was ready to support her, if she had shown any symptom of fainting; but she did not. She stood erect before him, very pale, but firm as a rock.

“And you want me to go away?” she said.

“Yes, I want you to disappear from this place before you become notorious as your father’s daughter. *That* would be about the worst reputation which you could carry through life. Believe me that I wish you well, Diana, and be ruled by me.”

“I will,” she answered, with a kind of despairing resignation. “It seems very dreary to go back to England to face the world all alone. But I will do as you tell me.”

She did not express any sympathy for her father, then languishing under arrest, whereby she proved herself very wicked and unwomanly, no doubt. But neither womanly virtues nor Chris-

tian graces are wont to flourish in the school in which Diana Paget had been reared. She obeyed Valentine Hawkehurst to the letter, without any sentimental lamentations whatever. Her scanty possessions were collected, and neatly packed, in little more than an hour. At three o'clock she lay down in her tawdry little bed-chamber to take what rest she might in the space of two hours. At six she stood by Valentine Hawkehurst on the platform of the railway station, with her face hidden by a brown gauze veil, waiting till the train was made ready to start.

It was after she was seated in the carriage that she spoke for the first time of her father.

"Is it likely to go very hard with him?" she asked.

"I hope not. We must try to pull him through it as well as we can. The charge may break down at the first examination. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Valentine."

They had just time to shake hands before the train moved off. Another moment and Miss

Paget and her fellow-passengers were speeding towards Liége.

Mr. Hawkehurst drew his hat over his eyes as he walked away from the station.

“The world will seem very dull and empty to me without her,” he said to himself. “I have done an unselfish thing for once in my life. I wonder whether the recording angel will carry that up to my credit, and whether the other fellow will blot out any of the old score in consideration of this one little bit of self-sacrifice.”



Book the Third.

HEAPING UP RICHES.

CHAPTER I.

A FORTUNATE MARRIAGE.

ELEVEN years had passed lightly enough over the glossy raven locks of Mr. Philip Sheldon. There are some men with whom Time deals gently, and he was one of them. The hard black eyes had lost none of their fierce brightness; the white teeth flashed with all their old brilliancy; the complexion, which had always been dusky of hue, was perhaps a shade or two darker; and the fierce black eyes seemed all the blacker by reason of the purple tinge beneath them. But the Philip Sheldon of to-day was, taken altogether, a handsomer man than the Philip Sheldon of eleven years ago.

Within those eleven years the Bloomsbury dentist had acquired a higher style of dress and bearing, and a certain improvement of tone and

manner. He was still an eminently respectable man, and a man whose chief claim to the esteem of his fellows lay in the fact of his unimpeachable respectability; but his respectability of to-day, as compared with that of eleven years before, was as the respectability of Tyburnia when contrasted with that of St. Pancras. He was not an aristocratic-looking man, or an elegant man; but you felt, as you contemplated him, that the bulwarks of the citadel of English respectability are defended by such as he.

Mr. Sheldon no longer experimentalised with lumps of beeswax and plaster-of-paris. All the appalling paraphernalia of his cruel art had long since been handed over to an aspiring young dentist, together with the respectable house in Fitzgeorge-street, the furniture, and—the connection. And thus had ended Philip Sheldon's career as a surgeon-dentist. Within a year of Tom Halliday's death his disconsolate widow had given her hand to her first sweetheart, not forgetful of her dead husband or ungrateful for much kindness and affection experienced at his hands, but yield-

ing rather to Philip's suit because she was unable to advance any fair show of reason whereby she might reject him.

"I told you she'd be afraid to refuse you," said George Sheldon, when the dentist came home from Barlingford, where Tom Halliday's widow was living with her mother.

Philip had answered his brother's questions rather ambiguously at first, but in the end had been fain to confess that he had asked Mrs. Halliday to marry him, and that his suit had prospered.

"That way of putting it is not very complimentary to me," he said, drawing himself up rather stiffly. "Georgy and I were attached to each other long ago; and it is scarcely strange if—"

"If you should make a match of it, Tom being gone. Poor old Tom! He and I were such cronies. I've always had an idea that neither you nor the other fellow quite understood that low fever of his. You did your best, no doubt; but I think you ought to have pulled him through somehow. However, that's not a pleasant subject

to talk of just now ; so I'll drop it, and wish you joy, Phil. It'll be rather a good match for you, I fancy," added George, contemplating his brother with a nervous twitching of his lips, which suggested that his mouth watered as he thought of Philip's good fortune.

"It's a very nice thing you drop into, old fellow, isn't it?" he asked presently, seeing that his brother was rather disinclined to discuss the subject.

"You know the state of my affairs well enough to be sure that I couldn't afford to marry a poor woman," answered Philip.

"And that it has been for a long time a vital necessity with you to marry a rich one," interjected his brother.

"Georgy will have a few hundreds, and—"

"A few thousands, you mean, Phil," cried Sheldon the younger with agreeable briskness ; "shall I tot it up for you?"

He was always eager to "tot" things up, and would scarcely have shrunk from setting down the stars of heaven in trim double columns of figures, had it seemed to his profit to do so.

“Let us put it in figures, Phil,” he said, getting his finger-tips in order for the fray. “There’s the money for Hyley Farm, twelve thousand three hundred and fifty ; I had it from poor Tom’s own lips. Then there’s that little property on Sheepfield Common—say seven-fifty, eh?—well, say seven hundred, if you like to leave a margin ; and then there are the insurances, three thou’ in the Alliance, fifteen hundred in the Phoenix, five hundred in the Suffolk Friendly : the total of which, my dear boy, is eighteen thousand five hundred pounds ; and a very nice thing for you to drop into, just as affairs were looking about as black as they could look.”

“Yes,” answered Mr. Sheldon the elder, who appeared by no means to relish this “totting-up” of his future wife’s fortune, “I have no doubt I ought to consider myself a very lucky man.”

“So Barlingford folks will say when they hear of the business. And now I hope you’re not going to forget your promise to me.”

“What promise?”

“That if you ever did get a stroke of luck, I should have a share of it—eh, Phil?”

Mr. Sheldon caressed his chin and looked thoughtfully at the fire.

“If my wife lets me have the handling of any of her money, you may depend upon it I’ll do what I can for you,” he said, after a pause.

“Don’t say that, Phil,” remonstrated George. “When a man says he’ll do what he can for you, it’s a sure sign he means to do nothing. Friendship and brotherly feeling are at an end when it comes to a question of ‘ifs’ and ‘cans.’ *If* your wife lets you have the handling of any of her money!” cried the lawyer with unspeakable derision; “that’s too good a joke for you to indulge in with *me*. Do you think I believe you will let that poor little woman keep custody of her money a day after she is your wife, or that you will let her friends tie it up for her before she marries you? No, Phil, you didn’t lay your plans for that.”

“What do you mean by my laying plans?” asked the dentist.

“That’s a point we won’t discuss, Philip,” answered the lawyer coolly. “You and I understand each other very well without entering into unpleasant details. You promised me a year ago—before Tom Halliday’s death—that if you ever came into a good thing, I should share in it. You *have* come into an uncommonly good thing, and I shall expect you to keep your promise.”

“Who says I am going to break it?” demanded Philip Sheldon with an injured air. “You shouldn’t be in such a hurry to cry out, George. You take the tone of a social Dick Turpin, and might as well hold a pistol to my head while you’re about it. Don’t alarm yourself. I have told you I will do what I can for you. I cannot and I shall not say more.”

The two men looked at each other. They were in the habit of taking the measure of all creation in their own eminently practical way, and they took each other’s measure now. After having done which, they parted with all cordial expressions of good-will and brotherly feeling. George went back to his dusty chambers in Gray’s

Inn, and Philip prepared for his return to Barlingford and his marriage with Georgina Halliday.

For ten years Georgy had been Philip Sheldon's wife, and she had found no reason to complain of her second choice. The current of her life had flowed smoothly enough since her first lover had become her husband. She still wore *moire-antique* dresses and gold chains; and if the dresses were of more simple fashion and the chains were less obtrusively displayed, she had to thank Mr. Sheldon for the refinement in her taste. Her views of life in general had expanded under Mr. Sheldon's influence. She no longer thought a high-wheeled dog-cart and a skittish mare the acme of earthly splendour; for she had a carriage and pair at her service, and a smart little page-boy to leap off the box in attendance on her when she paid visits or went shopping. Instead of the big comfortable old-fashioned farmhouse at Hyley, with its mysterious passages and impenetrable obscurities in the way of cupboards, she occupied

an intensely new detached villa in Bayswater, in which the eye that might chance to grow weary of sunshine and glitter would have sought in vain for a dark corner wherein to repose itself.

Mr. Sheldon's fortunes had prospered since his marriage with his friend's widow. For a man of his practical mind and energetic temperament, eighteen thousand pounds was a strong starting-point. His first step was to clear off all old engagements with Jews and Gentiles, and to turn his back on the respectable house in Fitzgeorgestreet. The earlier months of his married life he devoted to a pleasant tour on the Continent, not wasting time in picturesque byeways, or dawdling among inaccessible mountains, or mooning about drowsy old cathedrals, where there were pictures with curtains hanging before them, and prowling vergers who expected money for drawing aside the curtains ; but rattling at the highest continental speed from one big commercial city to another, and rubbing off the rust of Bloomsbury in the exchanges and on the quays of the busiest places in Europe. The time which Mr.

Sheldon forebore to squander in shadowy gothic aisles and under the shelter of Alpine heights, he accounted well bestowed in crowded cafés, and at the public tables of noted hotels where commercial men were wont to congregate; and as Georgy had no aspirings for the sublimity of Vandyke and Raphael, or the gigantic splendours of Alpine scenery, she was very well pleased to see continental life with the eyes of Philip Sheldon. How could a half-educated little woman, whose worldly experience was bounded by the suburbs of Barlingford, be otherwise than delighted by the glare and glitter of foreign cities? Georgy was childishly enraptured with everything she saw, from the sham diamonds and rubies of the Palais Royal to the fantastical bonbons of Berlin.

Her husband was very kind to her—after his own particular fashion, which was very different from blustering Tom Halliday's weak indulgence. He allotted and regulated her life to suit his own convenience, it is true; but he bought her handsome dresses, and took her with him in hired

carriages when he drove about the strange cities. He was apt to leave Georgy and the hired carriage at the corner of some street or before the door of some café, for an hour at a time, in the course of his peregrinations: but she speedily became accustomed to this, and provided herself with the Tauchnitz edition of a novel, wherewith to beguile the tedium of these intervals in the day's amusement. If Tom Halliday had left her for an hour at a street-corner or before the door of a café, she would have tortured herself and him by all manner of jealous suspicions and vague imaginings. But there was a stern gravity in Mr. Sheldon's character which precluded the possibility of any such shadowy fancies. Every action of his life seemed to involve such serious motives, the whole tenor of his existence was so orderly and business-like, that his wife was fain to submit to him as she would have submitted to some ponderous infallible machine, some monster of modern ingenuity and steam-power which cut asunder so many bars of iron or punched holes in so many paving-stones in a given number of seconds, and

was likely to go on dividing iron or piercing paving-stones for ever and ever.

She obeyed him, and was content to fashion her life according to his will, chiefly because she had a vague consciousness that to argue with him, or to seek to influence him, would be to attempt the impossible. Perhaps there was something more than this in her mind—some half-consciousness that there was a shapeless and invertebrate skeleton lurking in the shadowy background of her new life, a dusky and impalpable creature which it would not be well for her to examine or understand. She was a cowardly little woman, and finding herself tolerably happy in the present, she did not care to pierce the veil of the future, or to cast anxious glances backward to the past. She thought it just possible that there might be people in the world base enough to hint that Philip Sheldon had married her for love of her eighteen thousand pounds, rather than from pure devotion to herself. She knew that certain prudent friends and kindred in Barlingford had elevated their hands and eyebrows in

speechless horror when they discovered that she had married her second husband without a settlement: while one grim and elderly uncle had asked her whether she did not expect her father to turn in his grave by reason of her folly.

Georgy had shrugged her shoulders peevishly when her Barlingford friends remonstrated with her, and had declared that people were very cruel to her, and that it was a hard thing she could not choose for herself for once in her life. As to the settlements that people talked of, she protested indignantly that she was not so mean as to fancy her future husband a thief, and that to tie up her money in all sorts of ways would be to imply as much. And then, as it was only a year since poor dear Tom's death, she had been anxious to marry without fuss or parade. In fact, there were a hundred reasons against legal interference and legal tying-up of the money, with all that dreadful jargon about "whereas," and "hereinafter," and "provided always," and "nothing herein contained," which seems to hedge round a sum of money so closely that it is doubtful

whether the actual owner will ever be free to spend a sixpence of it after the execution of that formidable document intended to protect it from possible marauders.

George Sheldon had said something very near the truth when he had told Philip that Mrs. Halliday would be afraid to refuse him. The fair-haired, fair-faced little woman did in some manner fear the first lover of her girlhood. She had become his wife, and so far all things had gone well with her; but if misery and despair had been the necessary consequences of her union with him, she must have married him all the same, so dominant was the influence by which he ruled her. Of course Georgy was not herself aware of her own dependence. She accepted all things as they were presented to her by a stronger mind than her own. She wore her handsome silk dresses, and was especially particular as to the adjustment of her bonnet-strings, knowing that the smallest impropriety of attire was obnoxious to the well-ordered mind of her second husband. She obeyed him very much as a child obeys a strict but not unkind

schoolmaster. When he took her to a theatre or a racecourse, she sat by his side meekly, and felt like a child who has been good and is reaping the reward of goodness. And this state of things was in no wise disagreeable to her. She was perhaps quite as happy as it was in her nature to be; for she had no exalted capacity for happiness or misery. She felt that it was pleasant to have a handsome man, whose costume was always irreproachable, for her husband. Her only notion of a bad husband was a man who stayed out late, and came home under the influence of strong liquors consumed in unknown localities and amongst unknown people. So, as Mr. Sheldon rarely went out after dinner, and was on all occasions the most temperate of men, she naturally considered her second husband the very model of conjugal perfection. Thus it was that domestic life had passed smoothly enough for Mr. Sheldon and his wife during the ten years which had elapsed since their marriage.

As to the eighteen thousand pounds which she had brought Philip Sheldon, Georgy asked no

questions. She knew that she enjoyed luxuries and splendours which had never been hers in Tom Halliday's lifetime, and she was content to accept the goods which her second husband provided. Mr. Sheldon had become a stockbroker, and occupied an office in some dusky court within a few hundred yards of the Stock Exchange. He had, according to his own account, trebled Georgy's thousands since they had been in his hands. How the unsuccessful surgeon-dentist had blossomed all at once into a fortunate speculator was a problem too profound for Georgy's consideration. She knew that her husband had allied himself to a certain established firm of stockbrokers, and that the alliance had cost him some thousands of Tom Halliday's money. She had heard of preliminary steps to be taken to secure his admission as a member of some mysterious confraternity vaguely spoken of as "The House;" and she knew that Tom Halliday's thousands had been the seed from which had sprung other thousands, and that her husband had been altogether triumphant and successful.

It may be that it is easier to rig the market than to induce a given number of people to resort to a certain dull street in Bloomsbury for the purpose of having teeth extracted by an unknown practitioner. It is possible that the stockbroker is like the poet, a creature who is born and not made; a gifted and inspired being, not to be perfected by any specific education; a child of spontaneous instincts and untutored faculties. Certain it is that the divine afflatus from the nostrils of the god Plutus seemed to have descended upon Philip Sheldon; for he had entered the Stock Exchange an inexperienced stranger, and he held his place there amongst men whose boyhood had been spent in the offices of Capel-court, and whose youthful strength had been nourished in the chop-houses of Finch-lane and Threadneedle-street.

Mrs. Sheldon was satisfied with the general knowledge that Mr. Sheldon had been fortunate, and had never sought any more precise knowledge of her husband's affairs. Nor did she seek such knowledge even now, when her daughter was approaching womanhood, and might ere long

need some dower out of her mother's fortune. Poor Tom, trusting implicitly in the wife he loved, and making his will only as a precautionary measure, at a time when he seemed good for fifty years of life and strength, had not troubled himself about remote contingencies, and had in no wise foreseen the probability of a second husband for Georgy and a stepfather for his child.

Two children had been born to Mr. Sheldon since his marriage, and both had died in infancy. The loss of these children had fallen very heavily on the strong hard man, though he had never shed a tear or uttered a lamentation, or wasted an hour of his business-like existence by reason of his sorrow. Georgy had just sufficient penetration to perceive that her husband was bitterly disappointed when no more baby strangers came to replace those poor frail little lives which had withered away and vanished in spite of his anxiety to hold them.

"It seems as if there was a blight upon *my* children," he once said bitterly ; and this was the

only occasion on which his wife heard him complain of his evil fortune.

But one day when he had been particularly lucky in some speculation, when he had succeeded in achieving what his brother George spoke of as the "biggest line" he had ever done, Philip Sheldon came home to the Bayswater villa in a particularly bad humour, and for the first time since her marriage Georgy heard him quote a line of Scripture.

"Heaping up riches," he muttered, as he paced up and down the room; "heaping up riches, and ye cannot tell who shall gather them."

His wife knew then that he was thinking of his children. During the brief lives of those two fragile boy-babies the stockbroker had been wont to talk much of future successes in the way of money-making to be achieved by him for the enrichment and exaltation of these children. They were gone now, and no more came to replace them. And though Philip Sheldon still devoted himself to the sublime art of money-making, and still took delight in successful

time-bargains and all the scientific combinations of the money-market, the salt of life had lost something of its savour, and the chink of gold had lost somewhat of its music.

CHAPTER II.

CHARLOTTE.

THE little villa at Bayswater was looking its brightest on a resplendent midsummer afternoon, one year after Diana Paget's hurried hegira from Forêtdechéne. If the poor dentist's house in dingy Bloomsbury had been fresh and brilliant of aspect, how much more brilliant was the western home of the rich stockbroker, whose gate was within five minutes' walk of that aristocratic Eden, Kensington Gardens! Mr. Sheldon's small domain was called The Lawn, and consisted of something over half an acre of flower-garden and shrubbery, a two-stall stable and coach-house, a conservatory and fernery, and a moderate-sized house in the gothic or mediæval style, with mulioned windows in the dining-room and oriel in

the best bed-room, and with a great deal of unnecessary stonework and wooden excrescence in every direction.

The interior of Mr. Sheldon's dwelling bore no trace of that solid old-fashioned clumsiness which had distinguished his house in Fitzgeorgestreet. Having surrendered his ancestral chairs and tables in liquidation of his liabilities, Philip Sheldon was free to go with the times, and had furnished his gothic villa in the most approved modern style, but without any attempt at artistic grace or adornment. All was bright and handsome and neat and trim ; but the brightness and the neatness savoured just a little of furnished apartments at the seaside, and the eye sought in vain for the graceful disorder of an elegant home. The dining-room was gorgeous with all the splendour of new mahogany and crimson morocco ; the drawing-room was glorified by big looking-glasses, and the virginal freshness of gilt frames on which the feet of agile house-fly or clumsy blue-bottle had never rested. The crimsons and blues and greens and drabs of the Brussels carpets retained

the vivid brightness of the loom. The drops of the chandeliers twinkled like little stars in the sunshine; the brass birdeages were undimmed by any shadow of dulness. To Georgy's mind the gothic villa was the very perfection of a dwelling-place. The Barlingford housekeepers were wont to render their homes intolerable by extreme neatness. Georgy still believed in the infallibility of her native town, and the primness of Barlingford reigned supreme in the gothic villa. There were no books scattered on the polished walnut-wood tables in the drawing-room, no cabinets crammed with scraps of old china, no pictures, no queer old Indian feather-screens, no marvels of Chinese carving in discoloured ivory; none of those traces which the footsteps of the "collector" always leave behind him. Mr. Sheldon had no leisure for collecting; and Georgy preferred the gaudy pink-and-blue vases of a Regent-street china-shop to all the dingy *chefs-d'œuvre* of a Wedgwood, or the quaint shepherds and shepherdesses of Chelsea. As for books, were there not four or five resplendent volumes primly disposed

on one of the tables ; an illustrated edition of Cowper's lively and thrilling poems ; a volume of Rambles in Scotland, with copper-plate engravings of "Melrose by night," and Glasgow Cathedral, and Ben Nevis, and other scenic and architectural glories of North Britain ; a couple of volumes of *Punch*, and an illustrated *Vicar of Wakefield* ; and what more could elevated taste demand in the way of literature ? Nobody ever read the books ; but Mrs. Sheldon's visitors were sometimes glad to take refuge in the Scottish scenery and the pictorial Vicar, during that interval of dulness and indigestion which succeeds a middle-class dinner. Georgy read a great many books ; but they were all novels, procured from the Bayswater branch of a fashionable circulating library, and were condemned unread by Mr. Sheldon, who considered all works of fiction perfectly equal in demerit, and stigmatised them, in a general way, as "senseless trash." He had tried to read novels in the dreary days of his Bloomsbury probation ; but he had found that the heroes of them were impracticable beings, who were always talking of honour and

chivalry, and always sacrificing their own interests in an utterly preposterous manner; and he had thrown aside story after story in disgust.

“Give me a book that is something like life, and I’ll read it,” he exclaimed impatiently; “but I can’t swallow the high-flown prosings of impossibly virtuous inanities.”

One day, indeed, he had been struck by the power of a book, a book written by a certain Frenchman called Balzac. He had been riveted by the hideous cynicism, the supreme power of penetration into the vilest corners of wicked hearts; and he flung the book from him at last with an expression of unmitigated admiration.

“That man knows his fellows,” he cried, “and is not hypocrite enough to conceal his knowledge or to trick out his puppets in the tinsel and rags of false sentiment in order that critics and public may cry, ‘See, what noble instincts, what generous impulses, what unbounded sympathy for his fellow-creatures this man has!’ This Frenchman is an artist, and is not afraid to face the difficulties of his art. What a scoundrel this

Philippe Bridau is! And after wallowing in the gutter, he lives to bespatter his virtuous brother with the mire from his carriage-wheels. That is *real* life. Your English novelist would have made his villain hang himself with the string of his waistcoat in a condemned cell, while his amiable hero was declared heir to a dukedom and forty thousand a year. But this fellow Balzac knows better than that."

The days had passed when Mr. Sheldon had leisure to read Balzac. He read nothing but the newspapers now, and in the newspapers he read very little more than the money articles and such political news as seemed likely to affect the money-market. There is no such sole absorbing pursuit as the race which men run whose goal is the glittering Temple of Plutus. The golden apples which tempted Atalanta to slacken her pace are always rolling *before* the modern runner, and the greed of gain lends the wings of Hermes to his feet. Mr. Sheldon had sighed for pleasures sometimes in the days of his Bloomsbury martyrdom. He had sat by his open window on sultry summer evenings,

smoking his solitary cigar, and thinking moodily of all the pleasant resting-places from which other men were looking out at that golden western sky, deepening into crimson and melting into purples which even the London smoke could not obscure. He had sat alone, thinking of jovial parties lounging in the bow-windows of Greenwich taverns, with cool green hock-glasses and pale amber wine, and a litter of fruit and flowers on the table before them, while the broad river flowed past them with all the glory of the sunset on the rippling water, and one black brig standing sharply out against the yellow sky. He had thought of Richmond, and the dashing young men who drive there every summer in drags, with steel chain and bar clanking and glittering in front of the team, and two solemn grooms with folded arms seated stiff and statue-like behind. He had thought of Epsom, and the great Derby mob; and of all those golden goblets of pleasure which prosperous manhood drains to the very dregs. He had fancied the enjoyments which would be his if ever he were rich enough to pay for them. And now he was

able to afford all such pleasures he cared nothing for them; for the ecstacy of making money seemed better than any masculine dissipation or delight. He did sometimes dine at Greenwich. He knew the *menus* of the different taverns by heart, and had discovered that they were all alike vanity and indigestion; but he never seated himself at one of those glistening little tables, or deliberated with an obsequious waiter over the mysteries of the wine *carte*, without a settled purpose to be served by the eating of the dinner, and a definite good to be achieved by the wine he ordered. He gave many such entertainments at home and abroad; but they were all given to men who were likely to be useful to him—to rich men, or the toadies and hangers-on of rich men, the grand viziers of the sultans of the money-market. Such a thing as pleasure or hospitality pure and simple had no place in the plan of Mr. Sheldon's life. The race in which he was running was not to be won by a loiterer. The golden apples were always rolling on before the runner; and woe be to him who turned away from the course to dally with the

flowers or loiter by the cool streams that beautified the wayside.

Thus it was that Mr. Sheldon's existence grew day by day more completely absorbed by business pursuits and business interests. Poor Georgy complained peevishly of her husband's neglect; but she did not dare to pour her lamentations into the ear of the offender. It was a kind of relief to grumble about his busy life to servants and humble female friends and confidantes; but what could she say to Philip Sheldon himself? What ground had she for complaint? He very seldom stayed out late; he never came home tipsy. He was quite as cool and clear-headed and business-like, and as well able to "tot up" any given figures upon the back of an envelope after one of those diplomatic little Greenwich dinners as he was the first thing after breakfast. It had been an easy thing to tyrannise over poor Tom Halliday; but this man was a grave inscrutable creature, a domestic enigma which Georgy was always giving up in despair.

But so completely did Mr. Sheldon rule his

wife that when he informed her inferentially that she was a very happy woman, she accepted his view of the subject, and was content to believe herself blest.

In spite of those occasional grumbings to servants and female friends Mrs. Sheldon did think herself happy. Those occasional complaints were the minor notes in the harmony of her life, and only served to make the harmony complete. She read her novels, and fed a colony of little feeble twittering birds that occupied a big wire cage in the breakfast-parlour. She executed a good deal of fancy-work with beads and Berlin-wool; she dusted and arranged the splendours of the drawing-room with her own hands; and she took occasional walks in Kensington Gardens.

This was the ordinary course of her existence, now and then interrupted by such thrilling events as a dinner given to some important acquaintance of Mr. Sheldon's, or a visit to the school at which Charlotte Halliday was completing her education.

That young lady had been removed from the

Scarborough boarding-school to a highly respectable establishment at Brompton, within a few months of her mother's marriage with Mr. Sheldon. She had been a rosy-cheeked young damsel in pinafores at the time of that event, too young to express any strong feeling upon the subject of her mother's second choice ; but not too young to feel the loss of her father very deeply. Tom Halliday had been fondly attached to that bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked damsel of nine years' growth, and the girl had fully reciprocated his affection. How often they had talked together of the future which was to be so delightful for them both ; the new farm, which was to be such a paradise in comparison to Hyley ; the pony that Charlotte was to ride when she should be old enough to wear a habit like a lady, and to go about with her father to market-towns and corn-exchanges. The little girl had remembered all this, and had most bitterly lamented the loss of that dear and loving father.

She remembered it all to this day ; she regretted her loss to this day, though she was nearly of age, and on the point of leaving school for ever,

after having prolonged her school-days considerably beyond the usual period, at the express wish of her stepfather. To say that she disliked Mr. Sheldon is only to admit that she was subject to the natural prejudices of humanity. He had usurped the place of a beloved father, and he was in every way the opposite of that father. He had come between Charlotte Halliday and her mother, and had so absorbed the weak little woman into himself, as to leave Charlotte quite alone in the world. And yet he did his duty as few stepfathers do it. Charlotte admitted that he was very kind to her, that he was an excellent husband, and altogether the most conscientious and respectable of mankind; but she admitted with equal candour that she had never been able to like him. "I daresay it is very wicked of me not to be fond of him, when he is so good and generous to me," she said to her chosen friend and companion; "but I never can feel quite at home with him. I try to think of him as a father sometimes, but I never can get over the 'step.' Do you know I have dreamed of him sometimes; and though he

is so kind to me in reality, I always fancy him cruel to me in my dreams. I suppose it is on account of his black eyes and black whiskers," added Miss Halliday in a meditative tone. "It is certainly a misfortune for a person to have blacker eyes and whiskers than the rest of the world; for there seems something stern and hard, and almost murderous, in such excessive blackness."

Charlotte Halliday was a very different creature from the mother whom Mr. Sheldon had absorbed into himself. Georgy was one of the women who have "no characters at all," but Georgy's daughter was open to the charge of eccentricity rather than of inanity. She was a creature of fancies and impulses. She had written wild verses in the secrecy of her own chamber at midnight, and had torn her poetic effusions into a thousand fragments the morning after their composition. She played and sang very sweetly and danced admirably, and did everything in a wild way of her own, which was infinitely more charming than the commonplace perfection of other women. She was not a beauty according to those

established rules which everybody believes in until they meet a woman who sins against them all and yet is beautiful. Miss Halliday had thick black eyebrows, and large gray eyes which people were apt to mistake for black. She had a composite nose, and one of the sweetest mouths that ever smiled upon enraptured mankind. Nature had given her just a little more chin than a Greek sculptor would have allowed her; but by way of make-weight, the same careless Nature had bestowed upon her a throat which Phidias himself might have sought in vain to improve upon. And Nature had planted this young lady's head upon her shoulders with a grace so rare that it must needs be a happy accident in the workmanship of that immortal artist. Indeed it seemed as if Charlotte Halliday owed her charms to a series of happy accidents. The black eyebrows which made her face so piquant might have been destruction to another woman. The round column-like throat needed a fine frank face to surmount it, and the fine frank face was rendered gracious and womanly by the wealth of waving dark hair

which framed it. The girl was one of those bright happy creatures whom men worship and women love, and whom envy can scarcely dislike. She was so infinitely superior to both father and mother that a believer in hereditary attributes was fain to invent some mythical great-grandmother from whom the girl's graces might have been derived. But she had something of her father's easy goodnature and imprudent generosity; and was altogether one of those impulsive creatures whose lives are perpetual difficulties and dilemmas. More lectures had been delivered for her edification than for any other young lady in the Brompton boarding-school, and yet she had been the favourite and delight of everybody in the establishment, from the mistress of the mansion down to the iniquitous boy who cleaned the boots, and who was hounded and hunted, and abused and execrated, from dewy morn to dusky eve.

“ I allus puts plenty of elbow-grease on *your* boots, Miss 'Allundale, though cook does heave saucepan-lids at my 'ed and call me a lazy wiper,” this incorrigible imp protested to Charlotte one

morning when she had surprised him in tears and had consoled his woes by a donation of pence.

“All things love thee, so do I,” says the lover to his mistress ; and it is almost impossible not to adore a young lady who is universally beloved, for the simple reason that this general affection is very rarely accorded to any but a loving nature. There is an instinct in these things. From all the ruck of Cheapside a vagrant dog will select the man who has most toleration for the canine species, and is most likely to give him shelter. A little child coming suddenly into a circle of strangers knows in which lap it may find a haven, on which bosom it may discover safety and comfort. If mistress and schoolfellows, servants and shoeblack, dogs and cats, were fond of Charlotte Halliday, their affection had been engendered by her own sweet smiles and loving words, and helping hands always ready to give substantial succour or to aid by active service.

She had been at the Brompton gynæceum nearly eleven years—only leaving it for her holidays—and now her education was finished, and

Mr. Sheldon could find no excuse for leaving her at school any longer, so her departure had been finally agreed upon.

To most damsels of twenty-one this would have been a subject for rejoicing; but it was not so with Charlotte. She did not like her stepfather; and her mother, though very affectionate and gentle, was a person whose society was apt to become wearisome any time after the first half-hour of social intercourse. At Hyde Lodge Charlotte had a great deal more of Lingard and condensed and expurgated Gibbon than was quite agreeable; she had to get up at a preternatural hour in the morning and to devote herself to "studies of velocity," whose monotony became wearing as the drip, drip, drip of water on the skull of the tortured criminal. She was very tired of all the Hyde-Lodge lessons and accomplishments, the irregular French verbs—the 'braires' and 'traires' which were so difficult to remember, and which nobody ever could want to use in polite conversation—the ruined castles and dilapidated windmills, the perpetual

stumpy pieces of fallen timber and jagged posts executed with a BBB pencil, the chalky expanse of sky with that inevitable flight of crows scudding across it:—why must there be always crows scudding across a drawing-master's sky, and why so many jagged posts in a drawing-master's ideal of rural beauty? Charlotte was inexpressibly weary of all the stereotyped studies; but she liked Hyde Lodge better than the gothic villa. She liked the friendly schoolfellows with their loud talk and boisterous manners, the girls who called her "Halliday" and who were always borrowing her reels of crochet-cotton and her pencils, her collars and pocket-handkerchiefs. She liked the free-and-easy schoolgirl talk better than her mother's tame discourse; she preferred the homely litter of the spacious schoolroom to the prim splendours of Georgy's state chambers; and the cool lawn and shrubberies of Hyde Lodge were a hundredfold more pleasant to her than the stiff little parterre at Bayswater, wherein scarlet geraniums and calceolarias flourished with an excruciating luxuriance of growth and an

aggravating brilliancy of colour. She liked any place better than the hearth by which Philip Sheldon brooded with a dark thoughtful face, and a mind absorbed by the mysteries and complications of the Stock Exchange.

On this bright June afternoon other girls were chattering gaily about the fun of the breaking-up ball and the coming delights of the holidays, but Charlotte sighed when they reminded her that the end of her last half was close at hand.

She sat under a group of trees on the lawn, with a *crochet antimacassar* lying in her lap, and with her friend and favourite, Diana Paget, sitting by her side.

Hyde Lodge was that very establishment over which Priscilla Paget had reigned supreme for the last seventeen years of her life, and among all the pupils in a school of some forty or fifty girls, Diana was the one whom Charlotte Halliday had chosen for her dearest companion and confidante, clinging to her with a constancy not to be shaken by ill-fortune or absence. The girl knew very well that Diana Paget was a poor

relation and dependent; that her bills had never been paid; that all those incalculable and mysterious "extras" which are the martyrdom of parents and the delight of schoolmistresses, were a dead letter so far as Diana was concerned. She knew that "poor Di" had been taken home suddenly one day, not in compliance with any behest of her father's, but for the simple reason that her kinswoman's patience had been worn out by the Captain's dishonesty. It is doubtful whether Priscilla Paget had ever communicated these facts in any set phrase, but in a boarding-school such things make themselves known, and the girls had discussed the delinquencies of that dreadful creature, Captain Paget, very freely in the security of their dormitories.

Charlotte knew that her dearest friend was not a person whom it was advantageous to know. She had seen Diana depart ignominiously, and return mysteriously after an absence of some years, very shabby, very poor, very sombre and melancholy, and with no inclination to talk of those years of absence. Miss Halliday had known

all this, and had asked no questions. She took the returned wanderer to her heart, and cherished her with an affection which was far beyond the average measure of sisterly love.

“I thought I should never see you again, dear,” she cried when she and Diana had retired to a corner of the schoolroom to talk confidentially on the morning of Miss Paget’s return; “and I missed you so cruelly. Other girls are very nice and very kind to me. There is a new girl, Miss Spencer—that girl with flaxen hair, standing by the big Canterbury—whom I get on with delightfully; but there is no one in the world like you, Di. And where have you been all this time? With your papa, I suppose.”

“Yes,” answered Miss Paget gloomily; “I have been with my father. Don’t ask me anything about the last three years, Lotta. I have been utterly wretched and miserable, and I can’t bear to talk about my misery.”

“And you sha’n’t talk of it, darling,” cried Charlotte, pursing up her mouth for a kiss in a manner which might have been distraction to a

masculine mind of average susceptibility. "You sha'n't talk of anything or think of anything the least, least, least bit unpleasant; and you shall have my gold pencil-case," added Miss Halliday, wrenching that trinket suddenly from the ribbon by which it hung at her side. Perhaps there was just the least touch of Georgy's childishness in this impulsive habit of giving away all her small possessions, for which Lotta was distinguished. "Yes, you must, dear," she went on. "Mamma gave it me last half; but I don't want it; I don't like it; in point of fact, I have had it so long that I positively loathe it. And I know it's a poor trumpery thing, though mamma gave two guineas for it; but you know she is always imposed upon in shops. Do, do, do take it, darling, just to oblige me. And now, tell me, dear, you're going to stop here for ever and ever now you've come back?" asked Charlotte, after having thrust the gold pencil-case into Diana's unwilling hand.

"I don't know about for ever and ever, dear," Miss Paget replied presently; "but I daresay I

shall stay here till I'm tired of the place and everybody about it. You won't be here very long, you know, Lotta; for you'll be twenty next birthday, and I suppose you'll be leaving school before you're twenty-one. Most of the girls leave at eighteen or nineteen at latest; and you've been here so long, and are so much further advanced than others are. I am not going to be a pupil again—that's out of the question; for I'm just twenty-two, as you know. But Priscilla has been good enough to let me stay as a kind of second teacher for the little ones. It will be dull work going through the stupid abridgments of history and geography, and the scrappy bits of botany and conchology, with those incorrigible little ones; but of course I am very grateful to my cousin for giving me a home under any conditions, after papa's dishonourable conduct. If it were not for her, Lotta, I should have *no* home. What a happy girl you are, to have a respectable man for your father!"

Charlotte's brow darkened a little as her friend said this.

“He is not my own father, you know,” she said gravely; “and I should be a great deal happier if mamma and I were alone in the world. We could live in some dear little cottage on wide open downs near the sea, and I could have a linsey habit, and a pony, and ride about all day, and read and play to mamma at night. Of course Mr. Sheldon is very respectable, and I daresay it’s very wicked of me; but O, Diana, I think I should like him better if he were not *quite* so respectable. I saw your papa once when he came to call, and I thought him nicer than my step-father. But then I’m such a frivolous creature, Di, and am always thinking what I ought not to think.”

Nearly a year had passed since Diana’s return, and the girl’s life had been very monotonous during that time. She had stuck bravely to the abridgments and the juvenile scraps of -ologies, and had been altogether a model of propriety, sewing on such a number of strings and buttons during the period as can only be compassed by

the maternal mind. Her existence had been by no means as joyless or desolate as such an existence is generally represented by the writer of fiction. There was plenty of life and bustle in the big prosperous boarding-school, if there was not much variety. There were small scandals and small intrigues; departures and arrivals; wonderful hampers of cake and wine to be divided among the elect of a fashionable dormitory—for there is as wide a difference between the tone and status of the bedrooms in a ladies'-school as between the squares of Berkeley and Bedford. There were breaking-up parties, and the free-and-easy idleness of the holidays, when a few dark-complexioned girls from the colonies, a yellow-haired damsel from the remote north of Scotland, and Miss Diana Paget, were wont to cluster round the fire in the smaller of the school-rooms to tell ghost-stories or talk scandal in the gloaming.

It was a life which, taken with all its small hardships and petty annoyances, should have been as the life of Paradise compared to that which

Diana had led with her father and Mr. Hawkehurst. Whether the girl fully appreciated the change from the Bohemianism of her late existence to the respectability of Hyde Lodge was a question which no one had asked of her. She had fits of despondency now and then, even in the midst of her duties, and was apt to fall into a sombre reverie over one of the abridgments, whereby she was neglectful of her pupils' aspirates, and allowed Henry the Second to be made the poorer by the loss of an H, or Heliogabalus to be described by a name which that individual himself would have failed to recognise.

There were times when, in the midst of that shrill Babel, the schoolroom, Diana Paget heard the summer winds sighing in the pine-woods above Forêt-dechêne, and fancied herself standing once more in that classic temple on whose plastered wall Valentine had once cut her initials with his penknife in a fantastical monogram surmounted by a death's-head, and encircled by a serpent. She thought of that familiar companion very often, in spite of her juvenile pupils and the

sewing-on of tapes and buttons. He had seemed to her a perpetual enigma and mystery when she was with him ; and now that she was far away from him he was more than ever an inscrutable creature. Was he altogether vile, she wondered, or was there some redeeming virtue in his nature? He had taken trouble to secure her escape from shame and disgrace, and in doing this he surely had performed a good action ; but was it not just possible that he had taken this opportunity of getting rid of her because her presence was alike wearisome and inconvenient? She thought very bitterly of her fellow Bohemian when this view of his conduct presented itself to her. How heartlessly he had shuffled her off ; how cruelly he had sent her out into the hard pitiless world, to find a shelter as best she might !

“ What would have become of me if Priscilla had refused to take me in ? ” she asked herself. “ I wonder whether Mr. Hawkehurst ever considered that.”

More than one letter had come to Diana from

her old companion since her flight from the little Belgian watering-place. The first letter told her that her father had “tided over *that* business, and was in better feather than before the burst-up at the Hôtel d’Orange.” The letter was dated from Paris, but gave no information as to the present arrangements or future plans of the writer and his companion. Another letter, dated from the same place but not from the same address, came to her six months afterwards, and anon another; and it was such a wonderful thing for Captain Paget to inhabit the same city for twelve months together, that Diana began to cherish faint hopes of some amendment in the scheme of her father’s life and of Valentine’s, since any improvement in her father’s position would involve an improvement in that of his protégé.

Miss Paget’s regard for her father was by no means an absorbing affection. The Captain had never cared to conceal his indifference for his only child, or pretended to think her anything but a nuisance and an encumbrance; a superfluous piece of luggage more difficult to dispose of than any

other luggage, and altogether a stumbling-block in the stony path of a man who has to live by his wits. So perhaps it is scarcely strange that Diana did not think of her absent father with any passionate tenderness or sad yearning love. She thought of him very often; but her thoughts of him were painful and bitter. She thought still more often of his companion; and her thoughts of him were even more bitter.

The experiences of Diana Paget are not the experiences which make a pure or perfect woman. There are trials which chasten the heart and elevate the mind; but it is doubtful whether it can be for the welfare of any helpless, childish creature to be familiar with falsehood and chicanery, with debt and dishonour, from the earliest awakening of the intellect; to feel, from the age of six or seven, all the shame of a creature who is always eating food that will not be paid for, and lying on a bed out of which she may be turned at any moment with shrill reproaches and upbraidings; to hear her father abused and vilified by vulgar gossips over a tea-table, and to be re-

mined every day and every hour that she is an unprofitable encumbrance, a consumer of the bread of other people's children, an intruder in the household of hard pitiless poverty, a child whose only heritage is shame and dishonour. These things had hardened the heart of Captain Paget's daughter. There had been no counteracting influence—no fond, foolish, loving creature near at hand to save the girl from that perdition into which the child or woman who has never known what it is to be loved is apt to fall. For thirteen years of Diana's life all love and tenderness, endearing words, caressing touches, fond admiring looks, had been utterly unknown to her. To sit in a room with a father who was busy writing letters, and who was wont to knit his brows peevishly if she stirred, or to mutter an oath if she spoke; to be sent to a pawnbroker's in the gloaming with her father's watch, and to be scolded and sworn at on her return if the money-lender had advanced a less sum than was expected on that security—do not compose the most delightful or improving experiences of a home life. But Diana

could remember little of a more pleasant character respecting her existence during those brief periods when she was flung back upon her father's hands, and while that gentleman was casting about for some new victim on whom to plant her.

At Hyde Lodge, for the first time, the girl knew what it was to be loved. Bright, impulsive Charlotte Halliday took a fancy to her, as the schoolgirl phrase goes, and clung to her with a fond confiding affection. It may be that the softening influence came too late, or that there was some touch of natural hardness and bitterness in Diana's mind; for it is certain that Charlotte's affection did not soften the girl's heart or lessen her bitter consciousness of the wide difference between her own fortunes and those of the happier daughters whose fathers paid their debts. The very contrast between Charlotte's position and her own may have counteracted the good influence. It was very easy for Charlotte to be generous and amiable. *She* had never been hounded from pillar to post by shrewish matrons who had no words too bitter for their unprofitable charge. *She* had

never known what it was to rise up in the morning uncertain where she should lie down at night, or whether there would be any shelter at all for her hapless head; for who could tell that her father would be found at the lodging where he had last been heard of, and how should she obtain even workhouse hospitality, whose original parish was unknown to herself or her protector? To Charlotte these shameful experiences would have been as incomprehensible as the most abstruse theories of a metaphysician. Was it any wonder, then, if Charlotte was bright and womanly, and fond and tender—Charlotte, who had never been humiliated by the shabbiness of her clothes, and to whom the daily promenade had never been a shame and a degradation by reason of obvious decay in the heels of her boots?

“If your father would dress you decently, and supply you with proper boots, I could almost bring myself to keep you for nothing,” Priscilla had said to her reprobate kinsman’s daughter; “but the more one does for that man the less he will do himself; so the long and the short of it

is, that you will have to go back to him, for I cannot consent to have such an expensive establishment as mine degraded by the shabbiness of a relation."

Diana had been obliged to listen to such speeches as this very often during her first residence at Hyde Lodge, and then, perhaps, within a few minutes after Priscilla's lecture was concluded, Charlotte Halliday would bound into the room, looking as fresh and bright as the morning, and dressed in silk that rustled with newness and richness.

Keenly as Diana felt the difference between her friend's fortune and her own, she did nevertheless in some manner return Charlotte's affection. Her character was not to be altered all at once by this new atmosphere of love and tenderness; but she loved her generous friend and companion after her own fitful fashion, and defended her with passionate indignation if any other girl dared to hint the faintest disparagement of her graces or her virtues. She envied and loved her at the same time. She would accept

Charlotte's affection one day with unconcealed pleasure, and revolt against it on the next day as a species of patronage which stung her proud heart to the quick.

"Keep your pity for people who ask you for it," she had exclaimed once to poor bewildered Charlotte; "I am tired of being consoled and petted; go and talk to your prosperous friends, Miss Halliday; I am sick to death of hearing about your new frocks, and your holidays, and the presents your mamma is always bringing you."

And then when Charlotte looked at her friend with a sad perplexed face, Diana relented, and declared that she was a wicked discontented creature, unworthy of either pity or affection.

"I have had so much misery in my life, that I am very often inclined to quarrel with happy people without rhyme or reason, or only because they are happy," she said in explanation of her impatient temper.

"But who knows what happiness may be waiting for you in the future, Di?" exclaimed Miss Halliday. "You will marry some rich man

by and by, and forget that you ever knew what poverty was."

"I wonder where the rich man is to come from who will marry Captain Paget's daughter?" Diana asked contemptuously.

"Never mind where he comes from; he will come, depend upon it. The handsome young prince with the palace by the lake of Como will come to fall in love with my beautiful Diana, and then she will go and live at Como, and desert her faithful Charlotte, and live happy ever afterwards."

"Don't talk nonsense, Lotta," cried Miss Paget. "You know what kind of fate lies before me as well as I do. I looked at myself this morning, as I was plaiting my hair before the glass—you know how seldom one gets a turn at the glass in the blue room—and I saw a dark, ugly, evil-minded-looking creature, whose face frightened me. I have been getting wicked and ugly ever since I was a child. An aquiline nose and black eyes will not make a woman a beauty; she wants happiness and hope and love, and all

manner of things that I have never known, before she can be pretty."

"I have seen a beautiful woman sweeping a crossing," said Charlotte, doubtfully.

"Yes, 'but what sort of beauty was it?—a beauty that made you shudder. Don't talk about these things, Charlotte; you only encourage me to be bitter and discontented. I daresay I ought to be very happy, when I remember that I have dinner every day, and shoes and stockings, and a bed to lie down upon at night; and I *am* happier, now that I work for my living, than I was in the old time, when my cousin was always grumbling about her unpaid bills. But my life is very dreary and empty; and when I look forward to the future, it seems like looking out upon some level plain that leads nowhere, but across which I must tramp on for ever and ever, until I drop down and die."

It was something in this fashion that Miss Paget talked, as she sat in the garden with Charlotte Halliday at the close of the half-year. She was going to lose her faithful friend—the girl who,

so much richer and happier and more amiable than herself, had yet clung to her so fondly: she was going to lose this tender companion, and she was more sorry for the loss than she cared to express.

“You must come and see us very often,” Charlotte said for the hundredth time; “mamma will be so glad to have you, for my sake; and my stepfather never interferes with our arrangements. O, Di, how I wish you would come and live with us altogether! Would you come, if I could manage to arrange it?”

“How could I come? What Quixotic nonsense you talk, Lotta!”

“Not at all, dear; you could come as a sort of companion for me, or a sort of companion for mamma. What does it matter how you come, if I can only have you? My life will be so dreary in that dreadful new-looking house, unless I have a companion I love. Will you come, Di?—only tell me you will come! I am sure Mr. Sheldon would not refuse, if I asked him to let you live with us. Will you come, dear?—yes or

no. You would be glad to come, if you loved me."

"And I do love you, Lotta, with all my heart," answered Miss Paget with unusual fervour; "but then the whole of my heart is not much. As to coming to live with you, of course it would be a hundred thousand times pleasanter than the life I lead here; but it is not to be supposed that Mr. Sheldon will consent to have a stranger in his house just because his impulsive stepdaughter chooses to take a fancy to a school-fellow who isn't worthy of half her affection."

"Let me be the judge of that. As to my stepfather, I am almost sure of his consent. You don't know how indulgent he is to me; which shows what a wicked creature I must be not to like him. You shall come to us, Diana, and be my sister; and we will play and sing our pet duets together, and be as happy as two birds in a cage, or a good deal happier, for I never could quite understand the ecstatic delight of perpetual hempseed and an occasional peek at a dirty lump of sugar."

After this there came all the bustle of packing and preparation for departure, and a kind of saturnalia prevailed at Hyde Lodge—a saturnalia which terminated with the breaking-up ball; and who among the crowd of fair young dancers so bright as Charlotte Halliday, dressed in the schoolgirl's festal robes of cloud-like muslin, and with her white throat set off by a black ribbon and a gold locket?

Diana sat in a corner of the schoolroom towards the close of the evening, very weary of her share in the festival, and watched her friend, half in sadness, half in envy.

“Perhaps if I were like her, *he* would love me,” she thought.

CHAPTER III.

GEORGE SHELDON'S PROSPECTS.

FOR George Sheldon the passing years had brought very little improvement of fortune. He occupied his old dingy chambers in Gray's Inn, which had grown more dingy under the hand of Time; and he was wont to sit in his second-floor window on sultry summer Sundays, smoking his solitary cigar, and listening to the cawing of the rooks in the gardens beneath him, mingled with the voices of rebellious children, and shrill mothers threatening to "do for them," or to "flay them alive," in Somebody's Rents below. The lawyer used to be quite meditative on those Sunday afternoons, and would wonder what sort of a fellow Lord Bacon was, and how he contrived to get into a mess about taking bribes, when so many other fellows had done it quietly enough before

the Lord of Verulam's day, and even yet more quietly since : agreeably instigated thereto by the pleasant casuistry of Escobar.

Mr. Sheldon's prospects were by no means promising. From afar off he beheld his brother's star shining steadily in the commercial firmament ; but, except for an occasional dinner, he was very little the better for the stockbroker's existence. He had reminded his brother very often, and very persistently, of that vague promise which the dentist had made in the hour of his adversity—the promise to help his brother if he ever did “drop into a good thing.” But as it is difficult to prevent a man who is disposed to shuffle from shuffling out of the closest agreement that was ever made between Jones of the one part, and Smith of the other part, duly signed and witnessed and stamped with the sixpenny seal of infallibility ; so is it still more difficult to obtain the performance of loosely-worded promises, uttered in the confidential intercourse of kinsmen.

In the first year of his married life Philip Sheldon gave his brother a hundred pounds for

the carrying out of some grand scheme which the lawyer was then engaged in, and which, if successful, would secure for him a much larger fortune than Georgy's thousands. Unhappily the grand scheme was a failure; and the hundred pounds being gone, George applied again to his brother, reminding him once more of that promise made in Bloomsbury. But on this occasion Mr. Sheldon plainly told his kinsman that he could do no more for him.

"You must fight your own battle, George," he said, "as I have fought mine."

"Thank you, Philip," said the younger brother; "I would rather fight it any other way."

And then the two men looked at each other, as they were in the habit of doing sometimes, with a singularly intent gaze.

"You're very close-fisted with Tom Halliday's money," George said presently. "If I'd asked poor old Tom himself, I'm sure he wouldn't have refused to lend me two or three hundred."

"Then it's a pity you didn't ask him," Mr. Sheldon answered with supreme coolness.

“ I should have done so, fast enough, if I had thought he was going to die so suddenly. It was a bad day for me, and for him too, when he came to Fitzgeorge-street.”

“ What do you mean by that ?” asked Mr. Sheldon sharply.

“ You can pretty well guess my meaning, I should think.” George answered in a sulky tone.

“ No, I can’t ; and what’s more, I don’t mean to try. I’ll tell you what it is, Master George, you’ve been treating me to a good many hints and innuendoes lately ; and you must know very little of me if you don’t know that I’m the last kind of man to stand that sort of thing from you, or from anyone else. You have tried to take the tone of a man who has some kind of hold upon another. You had better understand at once that such a tone won’t answer with me. If you had any hold upon me, or any power over me, you’d be quick enough to use it ; and you ought to be aware that I know that, and can see to the bottom of such a shallow little game as yours.”

Mr. Sheldon the younger looked at his brother

with an expression of surprise that was not entirely unmingled with admiration.

“Well, you *are* a cool hand, Phil!” he said.

Here the conversation ended. The two brothers were very good friends after this, and George presented himself at the gothic villa whenever he received an invitation to dine there. The dinners were good, and the men who ate them were men of solidity and standing in the commercial world; and George was very glad to eat good dinners, and to meet eligible men; but he never again asked his brother for the loan of odd hundreds.

He grubbed on, as best he might, in the dingy Gray’s-Inn chambers. He had a little business—business which lay chiefly amongst men who wanted to borrow money, or whose halting footsteps required guidance through the quagmire of the Bankruptcy Court. He just contrived to keep his head above water, and his name in the Law-list, by means of such business; but the great scheme of his life remained as yet unripened, an undeveloped shadow to which he had in vain attempted to give a substance.

The leading idea of George Sheldon's life was the idea that there were great fortunes in the world waiting for claimants; and that a share of some such fortune was to be obtained by any man who had the talent to dig it out of the obscurity in which it was hidden. He was a student of old county histories, and a searcher of old newspapers; and his studies in that line had made him familiar with many strange stories: stories of field-labourers called away from the plough to be told they were the rightful owners of forty thousand a year; stories of old white-haired men starving to death in miserable garrets about Bethnal-green or Spitalfields, who could have claimed lands and riches immeasurable, had they known how to claim them; stories of half-crazy old women, who had wandered about the world with reticules of discoloured papers clamorously asserting their rights and wrongs unheeded and unbelieving, until they encountered sharp-witted lawyers who took up their claims, and carried them triumphantly into the ownership of illimitable wealth.

George Sheldon had read of these things until it had seemed to him that there must be some such chance for any man who would have patience to watch and wait for it. He had taken up several cases, and had fitted link after link together with extreme labour, and had hunted in parish registers until the cold mouldy atmosphere of vestries was as familiar to him as the air of Gray's Inn. But the cases had all broken down at more or less advanced stages; and after infinite patience and trouble, a good deal of money spent upon travelling and small fees to all manner of small people, and an incalculable number of hours wasted in listening to the rambling discourse of parish-clerks and oldest inhabitants, Mr. Sheldon had been compelled to abandon his hopes time after time, until a man with less firmly rooted ideas would have given up the hunting of registers and grubbing up of genealogies as a delusion and a snare.

George Sheldon's ideas were very firmly rooted, and he stuck to them with that dogged persistency which so often achieves great ends, that it seems

a kind of genius. He saw his brother's success, and contemplated the grandeurs of the gothic villa in a cynical rather than an envious spirit. How long would it all last? how long would the stock-broker float triumphantly onward upon that wonderful tide which is constituted by the rise and fall of the money-market?

"That sort of thing is all very well while a man keeps his head cool and clear," thought George; "but somehow or other men always seem to lose their heads on the Stock Exchange before they have done with it, and I daresay my wise brother will drop into a nice mess sooner or later. Setting aside all other considerations, I think I would rather have my chances than his; for I speculate very little more than my time and trouble, and I stand in to win a bigger sum than he will ever get in his line, let stocks rise and fall as they may."

During that summer in which Miss Halliday bade farewell to Hyde Lodge and her school-days, George Sheldon was occupied with the early steps in a search which he hoped would

end in the discovery of a prize rich enough to reward him for all his wasted time and labour.

Very early in the previous year there had appeared the following brief notice in the *Observer* :

“The Rev. John Haygarth, late vicar of Tilford Haven, Kent, died lately, without a will, or relation to claim his property, 100,000*l.* The Crown therefore claimed it. And last court-day the Prerogative Court of Canterbury decreed letters of administration to Mr. Paul, the nominee of the Crown.”

Some months after this an advertisement had been inserted in the *Times* newspaper to the following effect :

“NEXT OF KIN.—If the relatives or next of kin of the Rev. John Haygarth, late vicar of Tilford Haven, in the county of Kent, clerk, deceased, will apply, either personally or by letter, to Stephen Paul, Esq., solicitor for the affairs of her Majesty's Treasury, at the Treasury Chambers, Whitehall, London, they may hear of something to their advantage. The late Rev. John Haygarth is supposed to have been the son of Mat-

threw Haygarth, late of the parish of St. Judith, Ullerton, and Rebecca his wife, formerly Rebecca Caulfield, spinster, late of the same parish; both long since deceased."

Upon the strength of this advertisement George Sheldon began his search. His theory was, that there always existed an heir-at-law somewhere, if people would only have the patience to hunt him or her out; and he attributed his past failures rather to a want of endurance on his own part than to the breaking down of his pet theory.

On this occasion he began his work with more than usual determination.

"This is the biggest chance I've ever had," he said to himself, "and I should be something worse than a fool if I let it slip through my fingers."

The work was very dry and dreary, involving interminable hunting of registers, and questioning of oldest inhabitants. And the oldest inhabitants were so stupid, and the records of the registers so bewildering. One after another Mr. Sheldon set himself to examine the lines of the intestate's

kindred and ancestors : his father's only sister, his grandfather's brothers and sisters, and even to the brothers and sisters of his great-grandfather. At that point the Haygarth family melted away into the impenetrable darkness of the past. They were no high and haughty race of soldiers and scholars, churchmen and lawyers, or the tracing of them would have been a much easier matter. Burke would have told of them. There would have been old country houses filled with portraits, and garrulous old housekeepers learned in the traditions of the past. There would have been mouldering tombs and tarnished brasses in quiet country churches, with descriptive epitaphs, and many escutcheons. There would have been crumbling parchments recording the prowess of Sir Reginald, knight, or the learning of Sir Rupert, counsellor and judge. The Haygarths were a race of provincial tradesmen ; and had left no better record of their jog-trot journey through this world than the registry of births, marriages, and deaths, in obscure churches, or an occasional entry in the fly-leaf of a family Bible.

At present Mr. Sheldon was only at the beginning of his work. The father and grandfather and uncle and great-uncles, the great-grandfather and great-great-uncles, with all their progenies, lay before him in a maze of entanglement which it would be his business to unravel. And as he was obliged to keep his limited legal connection together, while he devoted himself to this task, the work promised to extend over months, or indeed years; and in the mean while there was always the fear that someone else, as quick-witted and indefatigable as himself, would take up the same tangled skein and succeed in the unravelment of it. Looking this fact full in the face, Mr. Sheldon decided that he must have an able and reliable coadjutor; but to find such a coadjutor, to find a man who would help him, on the chance of success, and not claim too large a share of the prize if success came, was more than the speculative attorney could hope. In the mean time his work progressed very slowly; and he was tormented by perpetual terror of that other sharp practitioner who might be following up the

same clue, and whose agents might watch him in and out of parish churches, and listen at street-corners when he was hunting an oldest inhabitant.

CHAPTER IV.

DIANA FINDS A NEW HOME.

THE holidays at Hyde Lodge brought at least repose for Diana Paget. The little ones had gone home, with the exception of two or three young colonists, and even they had perpetual liberty from lessons; so Diana had nothing to do but sit in the shady garden, reading or thinking, in the drowsy summer afternoons. Priscilla Paget had departed with the chief of the teachers for a sea-side holiday; other governesses had gone to their homes; and but for the presence of an elderly French woman, who slept through one half of the day, and wrote letters to her kindred during the other half, Diana would have been the only responsible person in the deserted habitation.

She did not complain of her loneliness, or envy

the delights of those who had departed. She was very glad to be quite alone, free to think her own thoughts, free to brood over those unforgotten years in which she had wandered over the face of the earth with her father and Valentine Hawkehurst. The few elder girls remaining at the Lodge thought Miss Paget unsociable because she preferred a lonely corner in the gardens and some battered old book of namby-pamby stories to the delights of their society, and criticised her very severely as they walked listlessly to and fro upon the lawn with big garden-hats, and arms entwined about each others' waists.

Alas for Diana, the battered book was only an excuse for solitude, and for a morbid indulgence in her own sad thoughts! She had lived the life of unblemished respectability for a year; and looking back now at the Bohemian wanderings, she regretted those days of humiliation and misery, and sighed for the rare delights of that disreputable past! Yes, she had revolted against the degraded existence; and now she was sorry for having lost its uncertain pleasures, its fitful

glimpses of sunshine. Was that true which Valentine had said, that no man can eat beef and mutton every day of his life; that it is better to be unutterably miserable one day and uproariously happy the next, than to tread one level path of dull content? Miss Paget began to think that there had been some reason in her old comrade's philosophy; for she found the level path very dreary. She let her thoughts wander whither they would in this quiet holiday idleness, and they went back to the years which she had spent with her father. She thought of winter evenings in London when Valentine had taken her the round of the theatres, and they had sat together in stifling upper boxes,—she pleased, he critical, and with so much to say to each other in the pauses of the performance. How kind he had been to her; how good, how brotherly! And then the pleasant walk home, through crowded noisy thoroughfares, and anon by long lines of quiet streets, in which they used to look up at the lighted windows of houses where parties were

being given, and sometimes stop to listen to the music and watch the figures of the dancers flitting across the blinds. She thought of the journeys she had travelled with her father and Valentine by land and sea; the lonely moonlight watches on the decks of steamers; the long chill nights in railway-carriages under the feeble glimmer of an oil-lamp, and how she and Valentine had beguiled the tedious hours with wild purposeless talk while Captain Paget slept. She remembered the strange cities which she and her father's protégé had looked at side by side: he with a calm listlessness of manner, which might either be real or assumed, but which never varied; she with an inward tremor of excitement and surprise. They had been very happy together, this lonely unprotected girl and the reckless adventurer. If his manner to her had been fitful, it had been sometimes dangerously, fatally kind. She looked back now, and remembered the days which she had spent with him, and knew that all the pleasures possible in a prosperous and successful life could never bring for

her such delight as she had known in the midst of her wanderings : though shame and danger lurked at every corner, and poverty, disguised in that tawdry masquerade habit in which the swindler dresses it, accompanied her wherever she went.

She had been happy with him because she had loved him. That close companionship, sisterly and brotherly though it had seemed, had been fatal for the lonely and friendless daughter of Horatio Paget. In her desolation she had clung to the one creature who was kind to her, who did not advertise his disdain for herself and her sex, or openly avow that she was a nuisance and an encumbrance. Every slight put upon her by her father had strengthened the chain that bound her to Valentine Hawkehurst : and as the friendship between them grew closer day by day, until all her thoughts and fancies took their colour from his, it seemed a matter of course that he should love her, and she never doubted his feelings or questioned her own. There had been much in his conduct to justify her belief that she was be-

loved ; so this inexperienced, untutored girl may surely be forgiven if she rested her faith in that fancied affection, and looked forward to some shadowy future in which she and Valentine would be man and wife, all in all to each other, free from the trammels of Captain Paget's elaborate schemes, and living honestly, somehow or other, by means of literature, or music, or pen-and-ink caricatures, or some of those liberal arts which have always been dear to the children of Bohemia. They would have lodgings in some street near the Thames, and go to a theatre or a concert every evening, and spend long summer days in suburban parks or on suburban commons, he lying on the grass smoking, she talking to him or reading to him, as his fancy might dictate. Before her twentieth birthday, the proudest woman is apt to regard the man she loves as a grand and superior creature ; and there had been a certain amount of reverential awe mingled with Diana's regard for Mr. Hawkehurst, scapegrace and adventurer though he was.

Little by little that bright girlish dream had

faded away. Fancy's enchanted palace had been shattered into a heap of shapeless ruin by those accidental scraps of hard worldly wisdom with which Valentine had pelted the fairy fabric. He a man to love, or to marry for love! Why, he talked like some hardened world-weary sinner who had done with every human emotion. The girl shuddered as she heard him. She had loved him, and believed in his love. She had fancied a tender meaning in the voice which softened when it spoke to her, a pensive earnestness in the dark eyes which looked at her; but just when the voice had seemed softest and sweetest, the pensive eyes most eloquently earnest, the adventurer's manner had changed all at once, and for ever. He had grown hard and cold and indifferent. He had scarcely tried to conceal the fact that the girl's companionship bored and wearied him. He had yawned in her face, and had abandoned himself to moody abstraction when accident obliged him to be alone with her. Miss Paget's pride had been equal to the occasion. Mary Anne Kepp would have dissolved into tears at the first

unkind word from the lips of her beloved ; but Mary Anne Kepp's daughter, with the blood of the Cromie Pagets in her veins, was quite a different person. She returned Mr. Hawkehurst's indifference with corresponding disregard. If his manner was cold as a bleak autumn, hers was icy as a severe winter ; only now and then, when she was very tired of her joyless existence, her untutored womanhood asserted itself, and she betrayed the real state of her feelings—betrayed herself as she had done on her last night at Forêtdechêne, when she and Valentine had looked down at the lighted windows shining dimly through the vaporous purple of the summer night. She looked back at the past now in the quiet of the school-garden, and tried to remember how miserable she had been, what agonies of despair she had suffered, how brief had been her delights, how bitter her disappointments. She tried to remember what tortures she had suffered from that wasted passion, that useless devotion. She tried to rejoice in the consciousness of the peace and respectability of her present

life : but she could not. That passionate yearning for the past possessed her so strongly. She could remember nothing except that she had been with him. She had seen his face, she had heard his voice ; and now how long and weary the time might be before she could again see that one beloved face or hear the dear familiar voice ! The brightest hope she had in these midsummer holidays was the hope of a letter from him ; and even that might be the prelude of disappointment. She wrestled with herself, and tried to exorcise those ghosts of memory which haunted her by day and wove themselves into her dreams by night ; but they were not to be laid at rest. She hated her folly ; but her folly was stronger than herself.

For three weeks Diana Paget had no companions but her sorrowful memories—her haunting shadows ; but at the end of that time the stagnant mill-pond of her life was suddenly ruffled—the dull course of existence was disturbed by the arrival of two letters. She found them lying by her plate upon the breakfast-table one bright July

morning; and while she was yet far away from the table she could see that one of the envelopes bore a foreign stamp, and was directed by the hand of Valentine Hawkehurst. She seated herself at the table in a delicious flutter of emotion, and tore open that foreign envelope; while the French governess poured out the tea, and while the little group of school-girls nudged one another and watched her eager face with insolent curiosity.

The first letter contained only a few lines.

“MY DEAR DIANA,” wrote the young man, “your father has decided on returning to London, where I believe he really intends to make a respectable start, if he can only get the opening and the help he wants. I know you will be glad to hear this. I don’t exactly say where we shall take up our quarters; but the Captain will of course come to see you; and if I can chasten my outward semblance sufficiently to venture within the sacred precincts of a lady’s school, I shall come with him. Direct to the old address, if you write before the end of the month, and believe me, as always, your friend,

VALENTINE.”

The second letter was in Charlotte Halliday's big bold hand, and was frank, impetuous, and loving as the girl herself.

“MY OWN DEAREST DI,—It is all arranged,” wrote Miss Halliday, dashing at once into the heart of the subject. “I talked mamma over the very first day after my return, and then there was nothing more to be done than to talk over Mr. Sheldon. Of course there was just a little difficulty in that, for he is so awfully practical; and he wanted to know why I wanted a companion, and what *use* you would be in the house; as if the very last thing one required in a companion was companionship. I'm almost afraid to tell you the iniquitous fables I invented about your extreme usefulness: your genius for millinery, and the mints of money you would save by making-up mamma's flimsy little caps; your taste for dress-making, &c. &c. &c. You *are* the cleverest creature in the world, you know, Di; for you must remember how you altered that green-silk dress for me when Miss Porson had made me a square-

shouldered fright. So, after a great of humming and ha-ing and argufication—*is* there such a word as ‘argufication,’ I wonder?—my stepfather said that if my heart was set upon having you, and if I thought you would be useful, you might come to us; but that he could not afford to give you any salary, and that if you wanted a new dress now and then, I must buy it for you out of my own allowance; and I will, darling, if you will only come and be my friend and sister. My life is dreadfully dull without you. I walk up and down the stiff little gravel paths, and stare at the geraniums and calceolarias. Mariana might have been dreary in her moated grange; but I daresay the Lincolnshire flowers grew wild and free, and she was spared the abomination of gaudy little patches of red and yellow, and waving ribbons of blue and white, which constitute the glory of modern gardening. Do come to me, dear. I have no one to talk to, and nothing to do. Mamma is a dear good affectionate soul; but she and I don’t understand each other. I don’t care for her twittering little birds, and she doesn’t care

for my whims and fancies. I have read novels until I am tired. I am not allowed to go out by myself, and mamma can scarcely walk to Kensington-gardens without sinking under the exertion. We drive out sometimes; but I am sick to death of crawling slowly up and down by the Serpentine staring at people's bonnets. I might enjoy it, perhaps, if I had you with me to make fun out of some of the bonnets. The house is very comfortable; but it always seems to me unpleasantly like some philanthropic institution in miniature. I long to scratch the walls, or break the windows; and I begin to understand the feelings of those unhappy paupers who tear up their clothes; they get utterly tired of their stagnation, you see, and must do something wicked and rebellious rather than do nothing at all. You will take pity upon my forlorn state, won't you, Di? I shall come to Hyde Lodge to-morrow afternoon with mamma, to hear your ulti—what's its name?—and in the mean while, and for ever afterwards, believe me to be your devoted and unchanging,

“LOTTA.”

Diana Paget's eyes grew dim as she read this letter.

"I love her very dearly," she thought, "but not one hundredfold as much as I ought to love her."

And then she went back to Mr. Hawkehurst's epistle, and read and re-read its half-dozen lines, wondering when he would come to London, and whether she would see him when he came. To see him again! The thought of that possibility seemed like a spot of vivid light, which dazzled her eyes and made them blind to anything around or beyond it. As for this offer of a strange home in the household of Mr. Sheldon, it seemed to her a matter of so very little importance where she went or what became of her, that she was quite willing to let other people decide her existence. Anything would be better than the monotony of Hyde Lodge. If Valentine Hawkehurst came to see her at Mr. Sheldon's house, he would be permitted to see her alone, most likely, and it would be something like the old times; whereas at the Lodge Priscilla Paget or one of the governesses would undoubtedly be present at any interview

between Diana and her old friend, and the real Valentine would be hidden under the semblance of a respectable young man, with very little to say for himself. Perhaps this one thought exercised considerable influence over Miss Paget's decision. She wanted so much to see Valentine alone, to know whether he had changed, to see his face at the first moment of meeting, and to discover, if possible, the solution of that enigma which was the grand mystery of her life—that one perpetual question which was always repeating itself in her brain—whether he was altogether cold and indifferent, or if there was not some hidden warmth, some secret tenderness beneath that repelling outward seeming?

In the afternoon Miss Halliday called with Mrs. Sheldon, and there was a long discussion about Diana Paget's future life. Georgy abandoned herself as unhesitatingly to the influence of her daughter as she did to that of her husband, and had been brought to think that it would be the most delightful thing in the world to have Miss Paget for a useful companion.

“And will you really make my caps, dear?” she said, when she had grown at her ease with Diana. “Miss Terly in the Bayswater-road charges me so much for the simplest little lace head-dress; and though Mr. Sheldon is very good about those sort of things, I know he sometimes thinks my bills rather high.”

Diana was very indifferent about her future, and the heart must have been very hard which could have resisted Charlotte's tender pleading; so it was ultimately decided that Miss Paget should write to her kinswoman to describe the offer that had been made to her of a new home, and to inquire if her services could be conveniently dispensed with at Hyde Lodge. After which decision Charlotte embraced her friend with enthusiasm, and departed, bearing off Mrs. Sheldon to the carriage which awaited them at the gates of Priscilla Paget's umbrageous domain.

Diana sighed as she went back to the empty schoolroom. Even Charlotte's affection could not altogether take the sting out of dependence. To go into a strange house amongst strange people,

and to hold a place in it only on the condition of being perpetually useful and unfailingly good-tempered and agreeable, is scarcely the pleasantest prospect which this world can offer to a proud and beautiful woman. Diana remembered her bright vision of Bohemianism in a lodging near the Strand. It would be very delightful to ride on sufferance in Mrs. Sheldon's carriage, no doubt; but O, how much pleasanter it would have been to sit by Valentine Hawkehurst in a hansom cab spinning along the road to Greenwich or Richmond!

She had promised to despatch her letter to Priscilla by that afternoon's post, and she kept her promise. The reply came by return of post, and was very kind. Priscilla advised her by all means to accept Miss Halliday's offer, which would give her a much better position than that which she occupied at Hyde Lodge. She would have time to improve herself, no doubt, Priscilla said, and might be able to hope for something still better in the course of two or three years; "for you must look the world straight in the face, Diana," wrote

the schoolmistress, "as I did before I was your age; and make up your mind to rely upon your own exertions, since you know what your father is, and how little you have to hope for from him. As you are to have no salary with the Sheldons, and will no doubt be expected to make a good appearance, I shall do what I can to help you with your wardrobe."

This letter decided the fate of Captain Paget's daughter. A week after Miss Halliday's visit to Hyde Lodge a hack cab carried Diana and all her earthly possessions to the Lawn, where Charlotte received her with open arms, and where she was inducted into a neatly furnished bedchamber adjoining that of her friend. Mr. Sheldon scrutinised her keenly from under the shadow of his thick black brows when he came home to dinner. He treated her with a stiff kind of politeness during the orderly progress of the meal; and once, when he looked at her, he was surprised to find that she was contemplating him with an expression of mingled wonder and reverence.

He was the first eminently respectable man

whom Miss Paget had ever encountered in familiar intercourse, and she was regarding him attentively, as an individual with scientific tastes might regard some natural curiosity.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE LAWN.

LIFE at the Lawn went by very smoothly for Mr. Sheldon's family. Georgy was very happy in the society of a companion who seemed really to have a natural taste for the manufacture of pretty little head-dresses from the merest fragments of material in the way of lace and ribbon. Diana had all that versatile cleverness and capacity for expedients which is likely to be acquired in a wandering and troubled life. She had learned more in her three years of discomfort with her father than in all the undeviating course of the Hyde-Lodge studies ; she had improved her French at one *table-d'hôte*, her German at another ; she had caught some new trick of style in every concert-room, some fresh combination of costume on every racecourse ; and, being really

grateful for Charlotte's disinterested affection, she brought all her accomplishments to bear to please her friend and her friend's household.

In this she succeeded admirably. Mrs. Sheldon found her daughter's society much more delightful now that the whole pressure of Charlotte's intellect and vitality no longer fell entirely upon herself. She liked to sit lazily in her arm-chair while the two girls chattered at their work, and she could venture an occasional remark, and fancy that she had a full share in the conversation. When the summer weather rendered walking a martyrdom, and driving an affliction, she could recline on her favourite sofa reading a novel, soothed by the feeble twittering of her birds; while Charlotte and Diana went out together protected by the smart boy in buttons, who was not altogether without human failings, and was apt to linger behind his fair charges, reading the boards before the doors of newsvendors' shops, or looking at the cartoons in *Punch* exhibited in the stationers' windows.

Mr. Sheldon made a point of pleasing his step-

daughter whenever it was possible for him to do so without palpable inconvenience to himself; and as she was to be gratified by so small a pecuniary sacrifice as the trifling increase of tradesmen's bills caused by Miss Paget's residence in the gothic villa, he was the last man in the world to refuse her that indulgence. His own pursuits were of so absorbing a nature as to leave little leisure for concern about other people's business. He asked no questions about his stepdaughter's companion; but he was not the less surprised to see this beautiful high-bred woman content to sit at his board as an unsalaried dependent.

"Your friend Miss Paget looks like a countess," he said one day to Charlotte. "I thought girls generally pitched upon some plain homely young woman for their pet companion, but you seem to have chosen the handsomest girl in the school."

"Yes, she is very handsome, is she not? I wish some of your rich City men would marry her, papa."

Miss Halliday consented to call her mother's

husband "Papa," though the caressing name seemed in a manner to stick in her throat. She had loved that blustrous good-tempered Tom Halliday so very dearly, and it was only to please poor Georgy that she brought herself to address any other man by the name that had been his.

"My City men have something better to do than to marry a young woman without a sixpence," answered Mr. Sheldon. "Why don't you try to catch one of them for yourself?"

"I don't like City men," said Charlotte quickly; and then she blushed, and added apologetically, "at least not the generality of City men, papa."

Diana had waited until her destiny was settled before answering Valentine Hawkehurst's letter; but she wrote to him directly she was established at the Lawn, and told him the change in her plans.

"I think papa had better let me come to see him at his lodgings," she said, "wherever they may be; for I should scarcely care about Mr. Sheldon seeing him. No one here knows anything definite about my history; and as it is just possible Mr. Sheldon may have encountered my

father somehow or other, it would be as well for him to keep clear of this house. I could not venture to say this to papa myself, but perhaps you could suggest it without offending him. You see I have grown very worldly-wise, and am learning to protect my own interests in the spirit which you have so instilled into me. I don't know whether that sort of spirit is likely to secure one's happiness, but I have no doubt it is the wisest and best for this world."

Miss Paget could not refrain from an occasional sneer when she wrote to her old companion. He never returned her sneers, or noticed them. His letters were always frank, friendly, and brotherly in tone.

"Neither my good opinion nor my bad opinion is of any consequence to him," Diana thought bitterly.

It was late in August when Captain Paget and his protégé came to town. Valentine suggested the wisdom of leaving Diana in her new home uncompromised by any past associations. But this was a suggestion which Horatio Paget could

not accept. His brightest successes in the way of scheming had been matured out of chance acquaintanceships with eligible men. A man who could afford such a luxury as a companion for his daughter must needs be eligible, and the Captain was not inclined to sacrifice his acquaintance from any extreme delicacy.

“My daughter seems to have made new friends for herself, and I should like to see what kind of people they are,” he said conclusively. “We’ll look them up this evening, Val.”

Mr. George Sheldon dined at the Lawn on the day on which Horatio Paget determined on “looking up” his daughter’s new friends, and he and the two girls were strolling in the garden when the Captain and Mr. Hawkehurst were announced. They had been told that Miss Paget was in the garden.

“Be good enough to take me straight to her,” said the Captain to the boy in buttons; “I am her father.”

Horatio Paget was too old a tactician not to know that by an unceremonious plunge into the

family circle he was more likely to secure an easy footing in the household than by any direct approach of the master. He had seen the little group in the garden, and had mistaken George for the head of the house.

Diana turned from pale to red, and from red to pale again, as she recognised the two men. There had been no announcement of their coming. She did not even know that they were in England.

“Papa!” she cried, and then held out her hand and greeted him; coldly enough, as it seemed to Charlotte, who fancied that any kind of *real* father must be very dear.

But Captain Paget was not to be satisfied by that cold greeting. It suited his purpose to be especially paternal on this occasion. He drew his daughter to his breast and embraced her affectionately, very much to that young lady’s surprise.

Then, having abandoned himself entirely for the moment to this tender impulse of paternity, he suddenly put his daughter aside, as if he had all at once remembered his duty to society, drew

himself up stiffly and saluted Miss Halliday and George Sheldon with uncovered head.

“Mr. Sheldon, I believe?” he murmured.

“George Sheldon,” answered that gentleman: “my brother Philip is in the drawing-room yonder, looking at us.”

Philip Sheldon came out into the garden as George said this. It was one of those sultry evenings on which the most delightful of gothic villas is apt to be too stifling for endurance; and in most of the prim suburban gardens there were people lounging listlessly among the flower-beds. Mr. Sheldon came to look at this patrician stranger who had just embraced his daughter's companion: whereupon Captain Paget introduced himself and his friend Mr. Hawkehurst. After the introduction Mr. Sheldon and the Captain fell into an easy conversation, while the two girls walked slowly along the gravel pathway with Valentine by their side, and while George loitered drearily along chewing the stalk of a geranium, and pondering the obscure reminiscences of the last oldest inhabitant whose shadowy memories he

had evoked in his search after new links in the chain of the Haygarths.

The two girls walked in the familiar school-girl fashion of Hyde Lodge, Charlotte's arm encircling the waist of her friend. They were both dressed in white muslin, and looked very shadowy and sylph-like in the summer dusk. Mr. Hawkehurst found himself in a new atmosphere in this suburban garden, with these two white-robed damsels by his side; for it seemed to him that Diana with Charlotte's arm round her waist, and a certain shy gentleness of manner which was new to him, was quite a different person from that Miss Paget whose wan face had looked at him so anxiously in the saloons of the Belgian Kursaal.

At first there was considerable restraint in the tone of the conversation, and some little of that unnecessary discussion as to whether this evening was warmer than the preceding evening, or whether it was not, indeed, the warmest evening of all that summer. And then, when the ice was broken, Mr. Hawkehurst began to talk at his ease

about Paris, which city Miss Halliday had never seen; about the last book, the last play, the last folly, the last fashionable bonnet; for it was one of the special attributes of this young Robert Macaire to be able to talk about anything, and to adapt himself to any society. Charlotte opened her eyes to their widest extent as she listened to this animated stranger. She had been so wearied by the dry-as-dust arguments of City men who had discussed the schemes of great contractors, “which will never be carried out, sir, while money is at its present rate, mark my words,”—or the chances of a company “which is eaten up by debenture-bonds and preference-shares, sir, and will never pay its original proprietors one sixpence of interest on their capital,” with a great deal more of the same character; and it was quite new to her to hear about novels, theatres, and bonnets, from masculine lips, and to find that there were men living who could interest themselves in such frivolities. Charlotte was delighted with Diana’s friend. It was she who encouraged Valentine every now and then by some exclamation of sur-

prise or expression of interest, while Miss Paget herself was thoughtful and silent.

It was not thus that she had hoped to meet Valentine Hawkehurst. She stole a look at him now and then as he walked by her side. Yes, it was the old face—the face which would have been so handsome if there had been warmth and life in it, instead of that cold listlessness which repelled all sympathy, and seemed to constitute a kind of mask behind which the real man hid himself.

Diana looked at him, and remembered her parting from him in the chill gray morning on the platform at Forêtdechêne. He had let her go out alone into the dreary world to encounter what fate she might, without any more appearance of anxiety than he might have exhibited had she been starting for a summer-day's holiday; and now, after a year of separation, he met her with the same air of unconcern, and could discourse conventional small-talk to another woman while she walked by his side.

While Mr. Hawkehurst was talking to Mr. Sheldon's stepdaughter, Captain Paget had con-

trived to make himself very agreeable to that gentleman himself. Lord Lytton has said that “there is something strange and almost mesmerical in the *rapport* between two evil natures. Bring two honest men together, and it is ten to one if they recognise each other as honest; differences in temper, manner, even politics, may make each misjudge the other. But bring together two men unprincipled and perverted—men who, if born in a cellar, would have been food for the hulks or gallows—and they understand each other by instant sympathy.” However this might be with these two men, they had speedily become upon very easy terms with each other. Mr. Sheldon’s plans for the making of money were very complicated in their nature, and he had frequent need of clever instruments to assist in the carrying out of his arrangements. Horatio Paget was the exact type of man most likely to be useful to such a speculator as Philip Sheldon. He was the very ideal of the “Promoter,” the well-dressed, well-mannered gentleman, beneath whose magic wand new companies arise as if by magic; the

man who, without a sixpence in his own pocket, can set a small Pactolus flowing from the pockets of other people; the man who, content himself to live in a humble second-floor at Chelsea, can point to gigantic hotels which are as the palaces of a new Brobdignag, and say, "Lo, those arose at my bidding!" Mr. Sheldon was always on the alert to discover anything or anybody likely to serve his own interest, either in the present or the future; and he came to the conclusion that Miss Paget's father was a person upon whom an occasional dinner might not be altogether thrown away.

"Take a chop with us to-morrow at six," he said, on parting from the Captain, "and then you can hear the two girls play and sing. They play remarkably well, I believe, from what other people tell me; but I am not a musical man myself."

Horatio Paget accepted the invitation as cordially as it was given. It is astonishing how genial and friendly these men of the world can be at the slightest imaginable notice. One can fancy the striped tigers of Bengal shaking paws in the

jungle, the vultures hob-nobbing in a mountain cleft over the torn carcass of a stag, the kites putting their beaks together after dining on a nest of innocent doves.

“Then we shall expect to see you at sharp six,” said Mr. Sheldon, “and your friend Mr. Hawkehurst with you, of course.”

After this the two gentlemen departed; Valentine shook hands with Diana, and took a more ceremonious leave of Charlotte. George Sheldon threw away his chewed geranium-stalk in order to bid good-evening to the visitors; and the little party walked to the garden-gate together.

“That Sheldon seems a very clever fellow,” said Captain Paget, as he and Valentine walked towards the Park, which they had to cross on their way to Chelsea, where the Captain had secured a convenient lodging. “I wonder whether he is any relation to the Sheldon who is in with a low set of money-lenders?”

“What, the Sheldon of Gray’s Inn?” exclaimed Mr. Hawkehurst. “We can easily find that out.”

Horatio Paget and Valentine Hawkehurst were frequent visitors at the Lawn after that first evening. Mr. Sheldon found the Captain useful to him in the carrying out of certain business arrangements on more than one occasion, and the relations between the respectable stockbroker and the disreputable adventurer assumed a very friendly character. Diana wondered to see so spotless a citizen as Philip Sheldon hand-and-glove with her father. Mrs. Sheldon and Charlotte were delighted with the Captain and his protégé; these two penniless Bohemians were so much more agreeable to the feminine mind than the City men who were wont to sit in the dining-room slowly imbibing Mr. Sheldon's old port in the long summer evenings, while their wives endured the abomination of desolation with Georgy and Charlotte in the drawing-room. Captain Paget paid Mrs. Sheldon flowery compliments, and told her delightful stories of the aristocracy and all that shining West-end world with which he had once been familiar. Poor simple Georgy regarded him with that reverential awe

which a middle-class country-bred woman is prone to feel for a man who bears upon him that ineffaceable stamp of high birth and good breeding, not to be destroyed by half a century of degradation. Nor could Charlotte withhold her admiration from the man whose tone was so infinitely superior to that of all the other men she had encountered. In his darkest hour Captain Paget had found his best friends, or his easiest dupes, among women. It had gone hard with him when his dear friend had withheld the temporary accommodation of a five-pound note; but it had been much harder when his friend's wife had refused the loan of "a little silver."

Valentine Hawkehurst came very often to the Lawn; sometimes with his friend and patron, sometimes alone. He brought the young ladies small offerings in the way of a popular French novel adapted for feminine perusal, or an occasional box for some theatre which had fallen upon evil days, and was liberal in the circulation of "paper." He met the two girls sometimes in their morning walks in Kensington-gardens, and

walked with them in the leafy avenues, and only left them at the gate by which they departed. So much of his life was a listless waiting for the arising of new chances, that he had ample time to waste in feminine society, and he seemed very well inclined to loiter away the leisure hours of existence in the companionship of Diana and her friend.

And was Miss Paget glad of his coming, and pleased to be in his company? Alas, no! The time had been, and only within a few months, when she had sickened for the sight of his familiar face, and fancied that the most exquisite happiness life could afford her would be to see him once more, anywhere, under any circumstances. She saw him now almost daily, and she was miserable. She saw him; but another woman had come between her and the man she loved; and now, if his voice took a softer tone, or if his eyes assumed a tender earnestness of expression, it might be Charlotte's influence which wrought the transformation. Who could say that it was not on Charlotte's account he came so often, and

lingered so long? Diana looked at him sometimes with haggard angry eyes, which saw that it was Miss Halliday who absorbed his attention. It was Charlotte,—Charlotte, who was so bright and happy a creature that the coldest heart must needs have been moved and melted by her fascination. What was the cold patrician beauty of Miss Paget's face when compared with the changeful charm of this radiant girl, with the flashing gray eyes and piquant features, and all those artless caprices of manner which made her arch-loveliness irresistible? Diana's heart grew sick and cold as she watched these two day by day, and saw the innocent school-girl's ascendancy over the adventurer. The attributes which made Charlotte charming were just those very attributes which Valentine Hawkehurst had been least accustomed to discover in the womankind he had hitherto encountered. He had seen beautiful women, elegant and fascinating women, without number; but this frank girlish nature, this happy childlike disposition, was entirely new to him. How should he have met bright childlike crea-

tures in the pathways which he had trodden? For the first time in his life a fresh young heart revealed its treasures of purity and tenderness before his world-weary eyes, and his own heart was melted by the new influence. He had admired Diana; he had been touched by her girlish fancy for him, and had loved her as well as he had believed himself capable of loving any woman. But when Prudence and Honour counselled him to stifle and crush his growing affection for the beautiful companion of his wanderings, the struggle had involved no agony of regret or despair. He had told himself that no good could ever come of his love for Captain Paget's daughter, and he had put aside that love before it had taken any vital root in his heart. He had been very strong and resolute in this matter—resisting looks of sad surprise which would have melted a softer nature. And he had been proud of his own firmness. “Better for her, and better for me,” he had said to himself; “let her outlive her foolish school-girl fancies, and wait patiently till her beauty wins her a rich husband. As for me, I

must marry some prosperous tradesman's widow, if I ever marry at all."

The influence of the world in which his life had been spent had degraded Valentine Hawkehurst, and had done much to harden him; and yet he was not altogether hard. He discovered his own weakness very soon after the beginning of his acquaintance with Mr. Sheldon's stepdaughter. He knew very well that if he had been no fitting lover for Diana Paget, he was still less a fitting lover for Charlotte Halliday. He knew that although it might suit Mr. Sheldon's purpose to make use of the Captain and himself as handy instruments for the accomplishment of somewhat dirty work, he would be the very last man to accept one of those useful instruments as a husband for his stepdaughter. He knew all this; and knew that, apart from all worldly considerations, there was an impassable gulf between himself and Charlotte. What could there be in common between the unprincipled companion of Horatio Paget and this innocent girl, whose darkest sin had been a neglected

lesson or an ill-written exercise? If he could have given her a home and a position, an untarnished name and respectable associations, he would even yet have been unworthy of her affection, unable to assure her happiness.

“I am a scoundrel and an adventurer,” he said to himself in his most contemptuous spirit. “If some benevolent fairy were to give me the brightest home that was ever created for man, and Charlotte for my wife, I daresay I should grow tired of my happiness in a week or two, and go out some night to look for a place where I could play billiards and drink beer. Is there any woman upon this earth who could render my existence supportable *without* billiards and beer?”

Knowing himself much better than the Grecian philosopher seemed to think it possible for human nature to know itself, Mr. Hawkehurst decided that it was his bounden duty, both for his own sake and that of the young lady in question, to keep clear of the house in which Miss Halliday lived, and the avenue in which she was wont to walk. He told himself this a

dozen times a day, and yet he made his appearance at the Lawn whenever he had the poorest shadow of an excuse for going there; and it seemed as if the whole business of his life lay at the two ends of Charlotte's favourite avenue, so often did he find himself called upon to perambulate that especial thoroughfare. He knew that he was weak and foolish and dishonourable; he knew that he was sowing the dragon's teeth from which were to spring up armed demons that would rend and tear him. But Charlotte's eyes were unspeakably bright and bewitching, and Charlotte's voice was very sweet and tender. A thrilling consciousness that he was not altogether an indifferent person in Charlotte's consideration, had possessed him of late when he found himself in that young lady's society, and a happiness which had hitherto been strange to him gave a new zest to his purposeless life.

He still affected the old indifference of manner, the idle listless tone of a being who has finished with all the joys and sorrows, affections and aspirations of the world in which he lives. But the

pretence had of late become a very shallow one. In Charlotte's presence he was eager and interested in spite of himself; childishly eager about the veriest trifles which interested her. Love had taken up the glass of Time; and the days and hours were reckoned by a new standard; everything in the world had suffered some wondrous change, which Valentine Hawkehurst tried in vain to understand. The very earth upon which he walked had undergone some mystic process of transformation; the very streets of London were new to him. He had known Kensington-gardens from his boyhood; but not those enchanted avenues of beech and elm in which he walked with Charlotte. In the plainest and most commonplace phraseology, Mr. Hawkehurst had fallen in love. This penniless adventurer, who at eight-and-twenty years of age was steeped to the lips in the worst experiences of a very indifferent world, found himself all at once hanging upon the words and living upon the looks of an ignorant school-girl.

The discovery that he was capable of this

tender weakness had an almost overwhelming effect upon Mr. Hawkehurst. He was ashamed of this touch of humanity; this foolish affection which had awakened all that was purest and best in a nature that had been so long abandoned to degrading influences. For some time he fought resolutely against that which he considered his folly; but the training which had made him the master of many a perplexing position had not given him the mastery over his own inclinations; and when he found that Charlotte's society had become the grand necessity of his life, he abandoned himself to his fate without further resistance. He let himself drift with the tide that was so much stronger than himself; and if there were breakers ahead, or fatal rocks lurking invisible beneath the blue waters, he must take his chance. His frail bark must go to pieces when her time came. In the mean while it was so delicious to float upon the summer sea, that a man could afford to forget future possibilities in the way of rocks and quicksands.

Miss Paget had known very few pleasures in

the course of her uncared-for youth ; but she hitherto had experienced no such anguish as that which she had now to endure in her daily intercourse with Valentine and Charlotte. She underwent her martyrdom bravely, and no prying eye discovered the sufferings which her proud nature supported in silence. “ Who takes any heed of my feelings, or cares whether I am glad or sorry ? ” she thought ; “ *he* does not.”

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